

CONSCIOUSNESS, ORGANISATION, AND THE GROWTH OF LABOUR:

EDINBURGH c.1917-1927

A Study in Political and Industrial Motivation

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## Contents

List of tables	6
List of figures	8
Abbreviations	9
Preface	11
Abstract	18
 <u>Part I</u> <u>Introductory</u>	 20
1. <u>Labour 1917-1927: in History and Theory</u>	21
1.1 Labour and political instability 1906-1927	21
1.2 The political incorporation of the working class	27
 2. <u>Consciousness, Action, and Labour</u>	 45
2.1 Introductory	45
2.2 Motives and political action	45
2.3 Contradictory consciousness and class action	49
2.4 Legitimising principles and contradictory consciousness	55
2.5 Power resources and class structure	58
2.6 The historical argument	61

<u>Part II</u>	<u>Edinburgh: Social Structure and Economy</u>	67
3.	<u>Edinburgh after the Great War</u>	68
	3.1 Introductory	68
	3.2 Urban development	69
	3.3 The middle class and its politics	78
	3.4 The working class	84
	3.5 Edinburgh's economy, 1917-1927	89
4.	<u>Standards of Living and the Working Class</u>	97
	4.1 Introductory	97
	4.2 The cost of living	97
	4.3 Employment incomes	101
	4.4 Unemployment	112
	4.5 Women's employment	125
	4.6 Working class housing	127
<u>Part III</u>	<u>Industry, Management, and Labour</u>	137
5.	<u>Economic Development and the Organisation of Work</u>	138
	5.1 Introductory	138
	5.2 The standard account	139
	5.3 The Scottish economy and industrial innovation	142
	5.4 Images of organisation and the organisation of management	146
	5.5 Managerial strategies and the organisation of work	149
6.	<u>Employers' Strategies and the Control of Work in Edinburgh</u>	154
	6.1 Introductory	154
	6.2 Engineering: structure and technology	155
	6.3 Engineering in war and peace	159
	6.4 Printing: technological change and industrial structure	169
	6.5 Printing: craft control in war and peace	171
	6.6 The rubber industry: technology and control	176
	6.7 The Castle Mills in war and peace	179
	6.8 The railways: structure and service	185
	6.9 The service in war and peace	188

7.	<u>Trade Union Development: Motivation and Organisation</u>	199
	7.1 Union mobilisation	199
	7.2 Mobilisation and advance, 1917-1918	203
	7.3 'A state of flux', 1919-1920	217
	7.4 Union organisation, 1917-1920	226
	7.5 'Fighting on the defensive' 1921-1927	231
	7.6 Trade unionism and organisation, 1921-1927	241
	7.7 Industry, management, and labour	257
	 <u>Part IV Labour Politics</u>	 259
8.	<u>Labour Politics and the Impact of War</u>	260
	8.1 Introductory	260
	8.2 Labour and socialist politics before 1914	264
	8.3 War: new issues and institutions	272
	8.4 War: the political institutions of labour	276
	8.5 War: political motivation	286
9.	<u>The Reorganisation of Labour 1917-1921</u>	292
	9.1 The post-war political context	292
	9.2 Edinburgh labour and the 1918 constitution	301
	9.3 The formation of the Trades and Labour Council	307
	9.4 Restructuring Marxist organisation	313
10.	<u>The Struggle for Labour Politics, 1921-1927</u>	325
	10.1 Introductory	325
	10.2 The failure of Direct Action, 1920	329
	10.3 Labour Socialism, Marxism, and their coalitions	337
	10.4 The Labour Socialist coalition and labourism	342
	10.5 The Labour Socialist coalition and the Labour left	353
	10.6 The Marxist coalition and the syndicalist tradition	360
	10.7 The Marxist coalition and the Labour left	366
	10.8 Concluding: responses to the General Strike	371
11.	<u>Conclusion</u>	374



Appendices

388

- A. Labour Party Organisation in Edinburgh,  
1917-1927. 389
- B. The Railwaymen's Intervention in Electoral  
Politics, 1921. 403
- C. A letter on the Time Demanded of Labour  
Public Representatives. 412

Select Bibliography

414

## List of Tables

3.1	Population of Edinburgh, 1891-1931.	69
3.2	Infant mortality in Edinburgh, 1914-1930.	74
3.3	Trade Union telephones in Edinburgh, 1923-1929.	77
3.4	Administration, commerce, professions and personal service as percentages of total occupied populations, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1921.	79
3.5	Occupations of Edinburgh town councillors, 1905-1935.	82
3.6	Property ownership by Edinburgh town councillors, 1905-1935.	83
3.7	Size of firms in Edinburgh, 1931.	85
3.8	Distribution of working population by industry, 1921.	87
3.9	Overseas trade of Leith, 1911-1927.	92
3.11	Working population and employment in Edinburgh, 1923-1927.	95
4.1	Cost of living indices, 1914-1927.	99
4.2	Edinburgh Trades Council's 'Household Budget', with prices applicable on 19 June 1920.	100
4.4	Intra-industrial wage differentials in Edinburgh, 1914-1926.	106
4.7	Unemployment in Edinburgh, 1923-1927.	113
4.9	Unemployment benefit scales, 1918-1926.	117
4.10	Numbers in receipt of Public Assistance in Edinburgh, 1923-1928.	120
4.11	Parish Relief scale in Edinburgh.	121
4.12	'Real' value of relief available in Edinburgh, 1918-1927.	121
4.13	Wage and Unemployment Insurance rates, 1920-1926.	122
4.15	Male and female employment, 1923-1927.	126
4.16	Rent as a proportion of Trades Council's 'Minimum Household Budget', 1914-1920.	129
4.17	Houses built (completions) in Edinburgh, 1923-1927.	130
4.18	Marriages and births in Edinburgh, 1914-1927.	131
4.19	Changes in population density in Edinburgh, 1914-1925.	132
4.20	Households occupying one and two rooms, Edinburgh 1914-1925.	132

7.1	Trade union membership, 1910-1920.	203
7.2	Basic working week in certain Edinburgh trades, 1914-1927.	220
7.3	Trade union membership, 1918-1927.	242
7.6	Trade union branches which ceased to be affiliated to Edinburgh Trades Council, 1920-21.	246
8.1	Delegates of Edinburgh Trades Council to the Labour Party, Edinburgh branch, 1916-1920.	281
9.1	Trade union and political affiliations of officers and executive committee members of the Labour Party, Edinburgh branch, 1917-1918.	304
10.1	Participation of ILP and Labour Party delegates in Trades and Labour Council, 1920-1927.	352
10.2	The ILP in Edinburgh, 1919-1927.	355
A.1	The growth of Labour Party institutions in Edinburgh, 1917-1924.	390
A.2	Affiliation fees of Divisional Labour Parties in Edinburgh, 1924-1928.	392
A.3	Political income and expenditure of Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council, 1919-1928.	395
A.4	Participation of political delegates in Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council, 1920-1927.	396
A.5	Organisational background of Trades and Labour Council Executive members, 1920-1928.	397
A.6	The Labour Party's performance in parliamentary elections in Edinburgh, 1918-1929.	398
A.7	Labour votes in municipal elections in Edinburgh, 1919-1927.	400
A.8	Socialist Labour Party votes in Edinburgh municipal elections, 1919-1927.	401
A.9	Communist Party votes in Edinburgh municipal elections, 1919-1927.	402
A.10	Municipal election performance of miscellaneous labour bodies in Edinburgh, 1919-1927.	402

## List of Figures

3.10	Overseas trade of three Scottish ports, 1919-1927.	93
4.3	Money wage rates in certain Edinburgh trades, 1914-1927.	104
4.5	Wage rates as a percentage of compositors' wage rates: selected trades, Edinburgh, 1914, 1921, 1925.	107
4.6	'Real' wage rates in Edinburgh, 1914-1927.	109
4.8	Unemployment in Edinburgh and Leith, 1923-1927.	114
4.14	Relationship between family income and unemployment in certain streets in St. Andrew's ward, Edinburgh, c.1930.	123-24
7.4	NUR Edinburgh No 1 branch: membership statistics, 1918-1927.	244
7.5	Trades Council: membership statistics, 1915-1927.	245



## Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AR	Annual Report
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
ASLE&F	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
BSISLP	British Section of the International Socialist Labour Party
BSP	British Socialist Party
BSSLH	Bulletin of the Society for the study of Labour History
BWL	British Workers' League
C&C	Capital and Class
CLC	Central Labour College
CP(GB)	Communist Party (of Great Britain)
DLP	Divisional Labour Party
DNB	The Compact Edition of the Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford 1975)
Edin.	Edinburgh
E&EA(EofS);E&AE(EofS)A	Engineering and Allied Employers Association (East of Scotland) (cp Bibliography)
EC	Executive Committee
ESAE&I;ESE&IA	East of Scotland Association of Engineers and Ironfounders (cp Bibliography)
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ILP(C)	Independent Labour Party, Edinburgh Central branch
J	Journal
JP	Justice of the Peace
LP	Labour Party
NAC	National Administrative Council
NAUL	National Amalgamated Union of Labour
NCLC	National Council of Labour Colleges
NEC	National Executive Committee
NLR	New Left Review
NSP	National Socialist Party
NUC	National Union of Clerks
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUWCM	National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party

S.	section (of this thesis)
SBU	Scottish Brassmoulders' Union
SDF	Social-Democratic Federation
SLC	Scottish Labour College
SLHA	Scottish Labour Housing Association
SLHSJ	Scottish Labour History Society Journal
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SSF	Scottish Socialist Federation
STA	Scottish Typographical Association
STUC	Scottish Trades Union Congress
TC	Trades Council (Edinburgh unless otherwise specified)
TDA	Tenants' Defence Association
TDL	Tenants' Defence League
T&LC	Trades and Labour Council (Edinburgh unless otherwise specified)
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UTC&LP	United Trades Council and Labour Party (Leith)
WEA	Workers' Educational Association

General note: Save in quotations, where the spelling and punctuation of the original have been retained, and in tables, a convention is adopted whereby the names of organisations (unions, etc.) are spelled with capital letters to distinguish them from the categories of people who compose them. Thus 'Clerks' refers to the National Union of Clerks, 'clerks' to the occupation; similarly, 'Labour' (the Labour Party) and 'labour', and so forth. By extension, 'Rubber Workers' refers to the No.292 branch of the NAUL.



## Preface

The study which follows is intended, primarily, to contribute to historical debate on the development of the British labour movement in a critical decade during and after the Great War; I hope that, incidentally, it may have implications for other areas of discussion. It is intended as a sociological contribution to historical debate. Existing historical literature is subjected to theoretical and methodological criticism. I have attempted to develop a theory concerning the sources of working class political action; a theory whose explanatory value should - by implication - not be limited to the particular historical events and period here considered. The theory rests, in large measure, on a reading of Gramsci, but is tempered by insights drawn from several areas of sociological literature. The ordering of levels of explanation and the relationships between explanatory factors suggested by the theory underlie the remainder of the study. I have tried, in short, to construct a sociological account of labour's development in an historical period.

My purpose, in this preface, is not to summarise the theory, nor the historical argument; neither do I wish to explain the structure of the volume, save to mention that the first chapter consists chiefly of historiographical and theoretical criticism, whilst the bulk of the next is concerned with elaborating the theory mentioned above. (Toward the end of chapter 2 the structure of the thesis is explained in more detail; the essentials of argument and structure are set down in the abstract which follows this preface.) Rather, my intention here is to outline the origins and history of the research, and to acknowledge some debts.

In the beginning, I hoped that the three years in which theses were 'normally' completed (as the Departmental prospectus had it: abnormally, I fondly imagined, perhaps four) would give me the opportunity to engage in sustained study of several issues. I hoped they could be 'married', as it were, in the research topic. These concerns ranged from very generalised, essentially theoretical, questions (why people believe what they do; how their beliefs relate to their interests, and to political action), to more specific historical matters. For instance, I intended to concentrate on the inter-war years since I found working class quiescence and political stability in that period of high unemployment problematical - in retrospect, an assumption which seems both naive and historically specific; and I wished to study the labour movement.

Looking back, it is possible to discern seven more or less distinct phases to my endeavour. Although I have some hesitation in describing them (for I can see some personal advantage in pretending that the project was pursued with a consistency of purpose, and with clear objectives, throughout), it will, I think, be of more use to others, not to say more truthful, to record these.

(1) The first phase lasted perhaps eighteen months, during which I undertook a programme of reading which was at the same time wide-ranging, eclectic, and directionless. This involved not merely acquainting myself with much of the literature directly relevant to my chosen area of study (in history, industrial relations, politics, and so forth), but also attempting to gain a grounding in sociology (which I had not previously studied). Over these months certain problems were clarified in my mind: thus I became, for example, unhappy with the school of thought - then more dominant in labour history even than it is today - which saw a distinction between leaders and members as the most important concept



in explaining the behaviour of the labour movement and its various elements. But, very often, I had not arrived at satisfactory solutions, even at a theoretical level, to these problems; and I remained in some respects unclear about the objectives and methods of my enterprise.

(2) Nevertheless, I had determined to pursue a local study, and for various reasons Edinburgh was a suitable area to carry these out. It was, in any case, important to begin the process of researching historical records. So I spent eight months reading, and noting, the minutes of the Edinburgh Trades Council for the years 1918-1939. This proved a far larger task than I had anticipated; yet at the same time it confirmed my view that, alone, these minutes were an inadequate source. In addition, I began to doubt the usefulness of treating the inter-war years as a whole: I developed a feeling that my study should encompass, rather, merely the immediate post-war years, and that consideration of the impact of war was unavoidable.

(3) I therefore faced a dilemma. I had been researching for seven terms: perhaps slightly more. I could now recast my objectives, in the light of my intense research in a narrow field, to produce an institutional study of the development of a Trades Council and Trades and Labour Council in the inter-war years. Alternatively, I could follow the logic of the instinct I had developed whilst at the Trades Council: this would mean a further period of research, probably delaying completion until well over three years were passed. Eventually, I decided for the latter course; only, however, after two or three months' work had made the dilemma clear, and had shewn the near-impossibility of any other approach.

(4) The fourth phase, then, involved a return to labour records, but a contraction in the time period to (roughly) 1917-1927;

this was seven or eight months' work.

(5) When this was completed, I began writing. By this time, however, my three years' grant had expired; I was unemployed, and my morale was low. In addition, I was faced with the need to find paid employment, albeit temporary or part-time. As a result, I was unable to tackle writing with any success; and after several more months' vain labour, I returned to historical records, and to attempting to clarify my ideas through reading. Although I was later to find the research done in this period of value, it was at the time useful chiefly because it was something which I could achieve.

(6) Eventually, after four-and-a-half years in Edinburgh, I was appointed a tutor/organiser with the WEA in north Kent. Involving a substantial responsibility for trade union education, this led to important developments in my understanding of the labour movement. The thesis which follows would undoubtedly be different, and I think weaker, but for this experience. It did mean, however, that for over two years I did next to no work on the thesis, which became but a distant worry.

(7) Finally, I resolved to complete the thesis: this has meant two years and more of hard labour. It has involved two types of work: firstly, reading (for not only was my knowledge of the literature some three years old, but I had also revised my essential outlook in ways which needed theoretical elaboration); and, secondly, writing.

This thesis has been a long time - too long - a-growing: over that period, I have accumulated many debts. I should like to thank the staff of the libraries at the Universities of Edinburgh and Kent;



of the Dartford Public Library; of the British Library of Political and Economic Science; of the Labour Party, Communist Party, and TUC libraries; and especially of the National Library of Scotland and the Edinburgh City Library. The Edinburgh District Committee of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (Engineering Section) kindly allowed me to consult certain of their records held by the National Library of Scotland. The Edinburgh Trades Council not only allowed me to consult their records, but made me more than welcome at their offices for seven or eight months: I am most grateful to the Council, to the then Secretary, Mr. John Henry, and to his assistant, Mrs. Nan Francis; Mr. Henry's successor, Mr. Des Loughney, has responded willingly to one or two postal requests for photocopies, and I should thank him for this.

Miss Isobel Geddie of the University of Edinburgh's Social Science Faculty has patiently dealt with my case for more years than she must have anticipated: I trust she will shortly be able to close what must now be a dusty file. I should also like to thank Miss Violet Laidlaw who has treated me similarly on behalf of the Department of Sociology. My research was made possible during 1974-1977 by a studentship from the Social Science Research Council; and for a total of perhaps fifteen months thereafter I was dependent upon the good offices of the Department of Health and Social Security: I am grateful to both.

At quite an early stage, Ian MacDougall gave me the benefit of his enormous knowledge of Scottish labour records: more recently, I have learnt, from his exhaustive Catalogue, how accurate his early guidance was. Over the years I have been helped in various ways by Mike Anderson, Trevor Jones, Bob Morris, and Guy Neave, of the University of Edinburgh; <sup>and</sup> by Bill Kennedy of the University of Essex. I am grateful to them, and to others whom I may inadvertently have omitted. My supervisors, too, deserve mention: John Orr was my main adviser during the first

two or three years. Since then, Gianfranco Poggi has been immensely helpful: encouraging, criticising, as appropriate, over six years. 'It is astonishing what foolish things one can temporarily believe if one thinks too long alone', wrote Keynes, 'particularly in economics (along with the other moral sciences)':<sup>1</sup> this thesis has been written largely alone, and if I have both completed it and avoided folly, Gian. may claim much of the credit.

The thesis has been typed by Sue Dyde, to whom I am most grateful: she has borne with my pedantry (which must, on occasion, have seemed obsessive) without complaint, and with great patience and friendliness throughout.

During my years in Edinburgh, I gained much - both personally and intellectually - from the friendship and comradeship of Caroline Bamford, Jean Casey, Tom Conlon, Diane Dixon, Michael Gold, Fiona Pirie, Dinah Robertson, and John and Pam Rodger. Michael and John embarked on sociology PhDs at the same time as I: with them I have engaged in many a long hour of profitable discussion; from them, I have received much valuable encouragement and advice. The late Margot Hoare wrote an encouraging letter to me at a particularly difficult time. I learnt much about the Edinburgh labour movement through working with the Edinburgh Chile Solidarity Committee: I am grateful to it, and to the members of the Chilean community in Edinburgh. Since coming to Kent, I have profited from working with Harold Goodwin, who has been persistently encouraging and supportive, and with John Thirkell of the University of Kent; I should also acknowledge my debt to my students in WEA and TUC classes, from whom I have learnt much.

1. J.M.Keynes, The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money (London 1936), vii.



Michael Gold preceded me to south-east England: his friendship and encouragement have continued to be invaluable.

My greatest debt, however, is twofold: firstly, to my parents, who brought me to the point where I could undertake the project, and who encouraged me throughout; my father, despite illness, also read the thesis in manuscript, and made a number of helpful suggestions. Secondly, to my wife, Hilary Rankin, who has lived with it very nearly as long as I yet has probably suffered more. Despite the pressures of her own degree, and subsequent qualification and practice as a solicitor, she has provided unceasing encouragement and support. Without these, the thesis would never have been written. Not only has she been of invaluable assistance in reading and correcting the typescript: she has read my manuscripts at every stage, and in total. The thesis would be the weaker but for the criticisms and suggestions she has made.

Finally, I am required to declare (a) that I have composed the thesis, and (b) that the work is my own. The debts acknowledged above notwithstanding, I so declare.

Dartford,

November 1983.

## Abstract

Existing accounts of the development of labour in Britain during the Great War and the following decade are problematical in several respects. Some of these problems may be overcome by specifying more precisely the relationship between class consciousness and political action; Gramsci's notion of 'contradictory consciousness' provides a basis for a theory of political motivation, stressing the fragmentary nature of consciousness. Other problems can be surmounted by shifting the focus of research from national to local institutions and processes. A study of the development of the labour movement in Edinburgh, grounded in the above theory, allows an argument to be developed as follows.

Advances by the working class movement during and just after the war were based in part on changes in economic, social, and political structures, which increased the relative strength of resources available to the movement. But fundamental to the advances, and especially to their character, was a shift in the language by which action could be motivated. The terminology of 'nationalism' became more open to use in the working class interest; notions such as 'organisation' and 'efficiency' found their meanings increasingly within a national, rather than in a market, context; the importance of planning lent legitimacy to some versions of socialism.

Important reorganisation of the local labour movement (1918-1921) was made possible by the strength and breadth of this language within the movement. But the language also influenced strongly the nature of the reorganisation achieved (in particular, it was based on 'mechanistic' images of organisation), and this had lasting effects.



From late 1920 economic factors shifted the balance of power in industry away from labour. Shifts also occurred in the language of motivation. These increased employers' ability to act in their own interests, whilst reducing workers' ability to defend themselves through industrial action. Unions responded through propaganda and, when this failed to ensure membership commitment, through tighter organisational discipline. At the same time, the basis of industrial action as a political strategy was eroded, weakening the Marxist element of the movement: this now became influential only in periods of heightened militancy (e.g., 1926).

From about 1921 onward, labour politics were increasingly directed by an informal alliance of economistic ('labourist') trade unionism and reformist socialist ('Labour Socialist') politics. Helped by the weakening of Marxist influence, this was based on two central principles: a clear distinction between industrial and political action, and a definition of the latter in electoral-parliamentary terms. Electoral politics offered not only an apparently viable strategy to power, but also one which did not ask unions to jeopardise their fragile industrial position. In addition, it permitted the creation of institutions (especially the Labour Party) which were relatively stable: something Marxist strategies could not achieve.

The thesis is divided into four parts. The first criticises various accounts of the development of the labour movement in this period, and outlines the alternative theory. In part II aspects of Edinburgh's social and industrial structure are explored, shewing inter alia that while the working class was highly fragmented, this was reduced in certain respects. Part III concerns labour's industrial strength: some accounts of capitalist development are criticised; work and union organisation in four industries is explored; variations in union strength are explained. Finally, the development of labour's political alliances and institutions is discussed.

Part OneIntroductory

'to fix one's mind on the military model is the mark of a fool: politics ... must have priority over its military aspect, and only politics creates the possibility for manoeuvre and movement.'

Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 232.

'What Darwin achieved in biology and Herbert Spencer attempted in philosophy, Marx accomplished in sociology. ... Marx has furnished the Labour Movement with a great tactical lesson. "Man makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole of the cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand. The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp on the brain of the living ..." '

Michael Marcus, B.L.,  
The Labour Standard, 17 April 1926.



## Chapter 1

### Labour 1917-1927: in History and Theory

#### 1.1 Labour and political instability 1906-1927

The years surrounding the Great War in Britain were understood by contemporaries, and have been explained by historians, in the language of change, of instability, of crisis. Interpretations have differed; and there have, of course, been those who have denied either the instability or its significance. But the weight of evidence is overwhelming. Politically, the period saw the decline of the Liberal Party from its massive victory of 1906 to relative insignificance by the mid-twenties; the weakening of the House of Lords; the extension of the franchise to all adult males (and some women); and the growth of the Labour Party from 42 MPs in 1910 to government in 1924. This last is itself associated with the deep restructuring of the working class movement, and has some relationship - however uneasy - with the 'labour unrest' of 1910-1914 and of the war years. The economy was in the midst of its long transformation from nineteenth century 'laissez-faire' capitalism: a transformation marked in particular by the development of new technologies, by the extension of the factory system and the consequent need for reorganisation of production processes, by the development of the mass working class market, and by the concentration of industrial ownership and the growth in the size of enterprises. And, of course, there was the war.

Fundamental to an understanding of this period is an awareness of the growing strength of the working class and of labour politics. The late nineteenth century saw the re-emergence of working class political activity independent of Liberalism after nearly half a century's dormancy. The formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 was the major event in the process by which the

labour movement broke - organisationally, at least - with Liberalism. This process began in the late 1880's with the formation of the Scottish Labour Party, and then the Independent Labour Party, continuing (at least) until the Labour Party succeeded in winning the Miners' MPs in 1910. But although the existence of an independent Labour Party clearly affected the parameters of the British political process its effect, in its early years, was at the margin. Even at its pre-war peak, in December 1910, Labour could return only 42 MPs, and that after the mass defection to the Party of the (previously Liberal) Miners' MPs; it won just over seven per cent of the votes at the election. And whilst the Party was thus growing only slowly, most of its victories were the product of a tacit understanding with the Liberals.

Before the war, then, the Labour Party posed only a distant threat to the political order; indeed, it has been argued that the Liberal Party had effectively reconstructed its politics in the pre-war period, enabling it to retain the working class support which the Labour Party threatened. On this analysis, Labour was contained (and might well have been reintegrated by Liberalism) had it not been for the - contingent and unpredictable - events of wartime, which led to the demise of the Liberal Party. As the major proponent of this view has succinctly written,

class had already clearly emerged as the bedrock of voter alignments in the pre-war period, yet at this stage the Liberals had been able to benefit from the process .... It was only after 1916 that Labour made an effective independent bid for power - and did so at a time when Asquith and Lloyd George obligingly dealt the Liberal Party a series of stunning blows. 1

Although there is much to be said against this viewpoint,<sup>2</sup> the apparent threat to the political order in the years before the Great War incontestably came not from the Labour Party but from the industrial unrest

1. P.F. Clarke in The Times Literary Supplement, 27 August 1976, quoted by A. Howkins, 'Edwardian Liberalism and Industrial Unrest: a class view of the decline of Liberalism,' History Workshop J. 4, 1977, 149.
2. See, e.g., Howkins, 143-61; P. Waller, review of P.F. Clarke, Lancashire and the New Liberalism (Cambridge 1971) Eng. Hist. Rev. 87, 1972, 843-6.



of 1910-1914: what became known as the 'Labour Unrest'. Articulated and given direction by the advocates of syndicalism and industrial unionism, this unrest represented clear evidence of the breakdown of the (relatively) peaceful relationship between trade unions and the state which had prevailed since the defeat of Chartism; and it implicitly challenged, and raised doubts about the extent of popular commitment to, the parliamentary system.<sup>3</sup>

The 'Labour Unrest' also raised serious questions about the overall <sup>appropriate</sup> strategy/for labour. Nor were these raised only implicitly. Syndicalist theory, though not the cause of the unrest, lent direction to the movement and a rationale to its methods. In return, of course, syndicalism gained strength as a theory of labour: it was no accident that substantial theoretical debate emerged during the period of the industrial unrest for the first time within the mature British labour movement. Syndicalists of Tom Mann's stature were able to evoke responses from the 'big guns' of the official Labour Party, notably Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and the Webbs - and responses which were not merely dismissive, but which engaged the syndicalists in theoretical debate.<sup>4</sup>

When war broke out in 1914, therefore, both the Labour Party's electoral strategy, and syndicalism, had records of success - at least in their own terms - behind them. The war divided socialists throughout Europe, and not least in Britain, but the divisions cut across the entire spectrum of labour thought - including the Labour Party and syndicalism. Royden Harrison suggests a typology of labour attitudes to the war, dividing them into four categories: there were 'the Hun-hating Jingos and ultra-loyalists'; the 'sane patriots'; those whose opposition to the war was reflected in 'renunciation, dissociation and withdrawal'; and the 'revolutionary defeatists'. Even this is to simplify: the ultra-loyalists, for instance, included trade unionists such as Havelock Wilson, but also the veteran Marxist H.M. Hyndman; among the 'sane patriots' were numbered

3. B. Holton, British Syndicalism 1900-1914. Myths and Realities (London 1976), esp. 74-76.

4. See, e.g., P. Snowden, Socialism and Syndicalism (London and Glasgow 1913); this and other contributions to the debate are discussed by R. Holton, 'Syndicalist theories of the State,' Sociol. Rev. 28, 1980, 5-21.



such trade union leaders as Fred Bramley of the Railwaymen as well as political intellectuals, as the Webbs; Ramsay MacDonald was unenthusiastically anti-war, as was Bob Smillie of the Mine-workers. Similarly, labour political organisations and movements were split between these various attitudes: Tom Mann, for instance, probably the leading syndicalist figure, was if anything a 'sane patriot!'; James Connolly, by contrast, was clearly a 'revolutionary defeatist'.<sup>5</sup> Parallel divisions within the British Socialist Party and the ILP are well documented.<sup>6</sup>

Such divisions inevitably prevented the labour movement's developing a worthwhile anti-war organisation, and implied a strong susceptibility (and in many cases, inclination) to respond to the imperatives of war. So the War Emergency: Workers' National Committee was set up, to be 'responsible for safeguarding working class interests during the "Emergency"', while the TUC's leaders signed the so-called Treasury Agreement, in effect suspending many trade union rights and standards for the duration.<sup>7</sup> Implicitly, of course, these moves reflected not simply a response to the war, but also an assumption that the working class could be defended most effectively <sup>national</sup> in negotiations with government. The

5. R.Harrison, 'The War Emergency Workers' National Committee, 1914-1920,' in A.Briggs and J.Saville (eds.), Essays in Labour History 1886-1923 (London 1971), 217-24.
6. W.Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21 (London 1969), esp. 84-104; R.Dowse, Left in the Centre. The Independent Labour Party 1893-1940 (London 1966), esp. 20-34.
7. These developments are reviewed by K.Middlemas, Politics in Industrial Society. The experience of the British System since 1911 (London 1979), 71-93; Harrison, 211-59.

labour leaders were to become 'the diplomatic representatives of the wage-earning class'.<sup>8</sup> Such thinking also, no doubt, lay behind the decision of Arthur Henderson and other Labour MPs to take office in Lloyd George's Government in 1916. To an extent, they were correct. As Ralph Miliband observes,

The war immediately gave Labour's leaders, particularly its industrial leaders, a very different and much enhanced status. For now they came to be needed (and, as the war dragged on, sorely needed) as brokers and intermediaries between the Government and a labour force whose acceptance of a new industrial discipline was an essential condition of military success. 9

There were, of course, limitations, as Henderson was to discover in 1917.<sup>10</sup> But there is no question that the war - or, more precisely, the production imperatives it implied - required a far more active integration of the working class into the national effort: production and efficiency became overnight matters of national, and not just private or commercial, interest. The involvement of the working class in industry could no longer be left to individual employers, with the state playing a background, supportive role - for instance, by asserting and enforcing a legal framework for the economy, or by protecting the 'political' realm against incursions of 'industrial' conflict, as during the 'Labour Unrest'.

It was against this background that the labour movement entered a remarkable period of development. Trade union membership grew at an unprecedented rate; when this growth began to be reversed in the early 'twenties, major regrouping and organisational restructuring took place among the unions. Not only were amalgamations commonplace; in many cases, and above all in the case of the TUC, unions' management structures were thoroughly revised. In the final year of the war the Labour Party agreed a new constitution and programme, which led -

8. S. and B. Webb, The History of Trade Unionism (London 1920) quoted in R. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism. A Study in the politics of labour (London 1973), 47.

9. Miliband, 47.

10. On Henderson's expulsion from the War Cabinet, see J.M. Winter, 'Arthur Henderson, the Russian Revolution, and the reconstruction of the Labour Party', Hist.J. 15, 1972, 753-73.



over the following decade - to a radical revision of the movement's political organisation. Although this occurred less immediately than Miliband assumed, over the following decade or so it

transformed the Labour Party from a loose federation of affiliated organisations into a centralised, nationally cohesive Party, with its own individual members, organised in local constituency parties, and subject to central party discipline. 11

It also had a profound effect on the roles of the ILP and the various Marxist parties. (In 1921 the latter themselves regrouped in the new Communist Party.) By the later 1920s, therefore, the institutional structure of the labour movement was, broadly, that which persisted for the following half century. So the decade starting in about 1917 moulded, in large part, the character of labour politics for later generations.

That decade, however, was far from stable. Both economic and political spheres were constantly in flux, and the pattern of labour politics which at length emerged was the result not just of the interaction between the different elements of the movement. For this interaction took place in a changing political and economic context which could rapidly alter the relationships between these various elements. For example, when war broke out, many attitudes relating to nationalism and internationalism (which had previously been of little practical importance within the movement) became those on which political allegiances of central importance turned. If other contextual changes were often slower or less dramatic, some were still more significant.

11. Miliband, 60.



Our purpose is to examine the process by which labour politics, in the broadest sense, were remoulded in the decade after 1917. In order to do so, however, we must examine also the changing context in which this process occurred: the development of the economy, of social relationships, of politics beyond the labour movement. Yet labour was a major actor in this environment, and one which was widely seen as the main threat to the stability - even the continuance - of the political and economic order; as a result, the story of how labour politics were remoulded must inevitably be interwoven with the story of how political restabilisation took place. It is to a discussion of the latter story that we now turn.

## 1.2 The political incorporation of the working class

The period surrounding the Great War in Britain was one of political crisis, instability, and restabilisation. In this section, we examine a number of theories which attempt to explain how the instability was overcome during the decade from about 1917. Before doing so, however, we look at how the stability of the previous period has been explained: this is essential for an adequate understanding of our period.

We shall divide attempts to account for the political development of the working class after Chartism into two broad categories, representing different theoretical traditions: Marxist and non-Marxist. Both are concerned to explain the quiescence of the working class; both do so by suggesting that it was in some way incorporated into the established political system. Beyond this, however, they diverge substantially: incorporation is above all

problematic for Marxism which must account for the failure of the working class to develop a revolutionary character.

For the classic non-Marxist explanation of working class incorporation we may turn to T.H.Marshall. Many working historians tacitly assume the adequacy of his account: Marshall's strength is his making the theory explicit. It is, he maintains, possible to distinguish a 'basic human equality', citizenship, which indicates 'full membership of a community',<sup>12</sup> from other types of (essentially economic) equality. Thus equality in the sense of citizenship is quite compatible with other forms of social inequality. Given this premise, Marshall argues that although social inequality clearly has not been eliminated, the period since the mid-nineteenth century has seen the systematic extension of citizenship rights to the working classes. Through measures such as the extension of the franchise, and the secret ballot, political or electoral rights were extended;<sup>13</sup> whilst the recognition of collective bargaining as a 'normal and peaceful market operation'<sup>14</sup> had 'created a secondary system of industrial citizenship parallel with and supplementary to the system of political citizenship'.<sup>15</sup> These processes were facilitated by the reduction in economic inequality, and by the 'great extension of the area of common culture and common experience.'<sup>16</sup> In

12. T.H.Marshall, 'Citizenship and social class' in his Sociology at the Crossroads and other Essays (London 1963), 72.

13. Ibid., 93.

14. Ibid., 117.

15. Ibid., 98.

16. Ibid., 121.



this way citizenship has been universalised and enriched, with the result that the working class could be expected to continue to accept the basic principles of the political and institutional order.

It has been pointed out that this, and similar accounts,<sup>17</sup> assume the existence of

an anxious, but nonetheless wise and open political elite who, sustained by a propitious set of institutions dating from medieval times and with liberal traditions, responded to just working class claims by introducing a series of reform measures which swept away political privilege and served to stave off 'extremist' movements. 18

Thus emphasis is placed, on the one hand, on the social conscience of the political elite, and on the other on its ability to rely on existing working class attitudes of deference and respectability, and on the integrating normative aspects of religion, 'embourgeoisement', propaganda, and so forth. In other words, as Marshall rather quaintly puts it,

as the social conscience stirs to life, class abatement, like smoke abatement, becomes a desirable aim to be pursued as far as is compatible with the continued efficiency of the social machine. 19

But this desire to bring the working class into the political establishment involves potential instabilities. These are overcome through the operation of existing social values, which are then complemented or replaced by the value consensus centred around the new universal citizenship. Yet, as H.F.Moorhouse has suggested,<sup>20</sup>

17. E.g., R.Bendix, Nation-Building and Citizenship (New York 1964); R.McKenzie and A.Silver, Angels in Marble (London 1968).

18. H.F.Moorhouse, 'The political incorporation of the British working class: an interpretation', Sociology 7, 1973, 342.

19. Marshall, 90.

20. Moorhouse, 341-3.



the heavy dependence on value consensus and integrated meaning systems in these historical accounts contrasts sharply with the weight of recent research which has cast doubt on the significance of these factors in modern Britain.<sup>21</sup> Of course, it may be that value dissensus and inconsistency of meaning systems are peculiarly modern phenomena, though this is prima facie unlikely; even so, the modern research casts doubt on these historical accounts in so far as they assume political consensus to be the result of the historical processes they describe.

Another feature on these accounts is a certain tendency to historical oversimplification and telescoping: for instance, there is a concentration on the purely formal sources of political power, such as the franchise, but little concrete discussion of working class political development, or of the real sources of power. Moreover, there is little or no discussion of periods of crisis in this process, which is seen as an essentially smooth progression.<sup>22</sup>

The typical Marxist attempt to account for the quiescence of the working class is very different; above all, Marxists have rarely attempted a theoretical overview of the entire period. There is almost invariably a sense of profound discontinuity, with the turning point somewhere around the Great War. This largely reflects a shift in the immediate object of explanation: whereas for the nineteenth century the question at issue is the quiescence of the working class, in the post-war period it is the quiescence of the Labour Party, or at least its failure to mobilise the working class in any significant non-electoral way. Much of the theory is not explicitly articulated by its authors, and must be reconstructed from work in which it is implicit.

21. E.g., M.Mann, 'The social cohesion of liberal democracy', Amer.Sociol.Rev. 35, 1970, 423-39; J.Westergaard, 'The rediscovery of the cash nexus. Some recent interpretations of trends in British class structure,' Socialist Register 1970, 111-138.

22. Moorhouse, 343-4.

So far as the nineteenth century working class is concerned, the main explanatory concept for Marxists has been the 'labour aristocracy'. This seems to have originated in popular usage in the 1840s and 1850s,<sup>23</sup> was given rigour by Lenin in his work on imperialism,<sup>24</sup> and was certainly a staple of British Marxism in the inter-war period.<sup>25</sup> In recent years it has been the subject of substantial methodological and empirical debate:<sup>26</sup> we need not review this, but it is useful to summarise briefly two main versions of the theory of the labour aristocracy.<sup>27</sup> The classic version holds that there was an identifiable stratum of the working class, distinguished by greater wealth and elitist values, which was responsible in some way for the retardation (and often betrayal) of the working class as a whole. It is often associated with, firstly, the Leninist theory of imperialism, the labour aristocracy being 'bribed' or 'bought off' by a section of the profit deriving from colonial exploitation - and also with a highly conspiratorial and manipulative view of bourgeois rule. This perspective, with its intimate links with political debate, has inevitably involved a

23. M.Shepherd, 'The origins and incidence of the term "labour aristocracy"', BSSLH 37, 1978, 51-67; J.Melling, 'Aristocrats and Artisans', BSSLH 39, 1979, 16-22; Shepherd, 'Labour aristocracy: a reply', BSSLH 40, 1980, 16-18.
24. E.Hobsbawm, 'Lenin and the "aristocracy of labour"', Marxism Today 14, 1970, 207-210.
25. S.Macintyre, 'British labour, Marxism and working class apathy in the nineteen twenties', Hist.J. 20, 1977, esp. 490-93.
26. The most recent round of debate was stimulated by H.F.Moorhouse, 'The Marxist theory of the labour aristocracy', Social History 3, 1978, 61-82; among the valuable contributions in subsequent issues, see esp. A.Reid, 'Politics and economics in the formation of the British working class: a response to H.F.Moorhouse', Social History 3, 1978, 347-61.
27. This distinction is made by G.McLennan, '"The labour aristocracy" and "incorporation": notes on some terms in the social history of the working class', Social History 6, 1981, esp. 72-3.



pejorative characterisation of the labour aristocracy. The 'revised' version has been concerned to dissociate historical analysis from this emotive and pejorative heritage. Whilst it accepts the existence of a labour aristocracy as a distinct stratum, it sees the latter's privileges as the result of struggle rather than conspiracy; and it sees the labour aristocratic values (of respectability and so on) as negotiated rather than imposed - the result of an active engagement by a section of the working class with dominant bourgeois values. In this version, the labour aristocracy is often seen as an element in the achievement of 'hegemony' in a Gramscian sense:

Hegemony over the working class should therefore not be seen in terms of a re-moulding of the 'respectable' skilled strata in the bourgeois image. It arose from a complex set of social relations, in which bourgeois reform aimed at imposing social discipline was one, but only one, element. It would be equally true to say that relations of hegemony involved the imposition on the bourgeoisie of some form of representation, at all levels of social practice, of working class interests (especially, but not exclusively, those of the labour aristocracy). 28

Now exponents of both versions of the theory accept that the labour aristocracy, as a distinct stratum, had disappeared (or at least undergone substantial change) by 1918, and had lost much of its stabilising role. 'The period from 1914 on was to see a collapse of the old labour aristocracy', according to Eric Hobsbawm,<sup>29</sup> while for John Foster 'the device of bribing a whole stratum "through the market" was becoming both economically difficult and politically unreliable'<sup>30</sup>

28. R.Gray, 'Bourgeois hegemony in Victorian Britain', in J.Bloomfield (ed.), Class, Hegemony and Party (London 1977), 88.
29. 'The labour aristocracy in nineteenth century Britain' in E.Hobsbawm, Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour (London 1968), 300.
30. Foster, 'British Imperialism and the labour aristocracy' in J.Skelley (ed.), The General Strike 1926 (London 1976), 20.



from the late nineteenth century onward.

Certainly the period after the Great War was very different from the late Victorian years. In particular, whilst in the earlier period the working class had not developed class-based political organisations, by the 1920s these were well-established: if the labour aristocracy was still important, it was effective in a very different way. But the very development of class-based political organisations seems to have led to a major theoretical shift. The theory of the labour aristocracy explicitly seeks to explain working class consciousness and activity by reference to capitalist economic development, at least in large part. At a certain stage, it suggests, capitalism fragments the working class in a particularly significant manner, so that one stratum can receive (or win) important privileges: this has important implications for working class politics. The existence of the Labour Party appears to have led to an assumption that adequate explanations of working class consciousness and action may be found in a study of the Party itself:<sup>31</sup> rather than seeking to explain the development of working class politics by reference to economy and social structure, reference is made to the organisational and other characteristics of the labour movement. Of course, the character of the Labour Party and the other institutions of the movement must be a factor in an account of political restabilisation; but to make it the major factor explaining working class consciousness and action comes close to circularity.

Yet the main theoretical approaches to the development of labour politics in the 1920s come dangerously close to doing just this: they

31. The titles of G.D.H.Cole's classic works of labour history illustrate this assumption: British Working Class Politics 1832-1914 (London 1941), but he saw A History of the Labour Party from 1914 (London 1948) as being an adequate sequel. To a lesser extent, the existence of the Communist Party, and the growth of the trade unions, have had analogous effects.



are strong on the nature of political organisations, but short of sustained discussion of the sources of class consciousness. In consequence, they tend to oversimplify the crucial, but highly complex, relationship between organisational factors and class mobilisation. We can distinguish four main theoretical approaches; they differ more in their area of study than in methodology. Their common element is a thesis that the 'incorporation', or 'integration', by various means, of working class leaders was effective in hindering or preventing the adoption by the labour movement (or the working class) of a revolutionary socialist perspective. Let us examine these in turn.

The first approach stresses the role of trade union leaderships. This clearly has its origins in the political debates within the left in the 'twenties<sup>32</sup> but has also formed the backbone of some, more recent, writing. In the 'twenties, many elements of the political left adopted the view that trade union leaders diverted discontent into harmless channels; the Communist Party went so far as to claim this was the chief purpose of the leadership, particularly in the period after the General Strike.<sup>33</sup> This did not necessarily go hand in hand with the assumption that the working class was incipiently militant or revolutionary (though, especially in some simplified accounts, this was a tendency). Even in popular versions, however, there could be a certain bizarre logic: leaders were traitors, but the workers were fools for allowing themselves to be duped. In the more sophisticated

32. See, e.g., R. Palme Dutt's 'Notes of the Month' in Labour Monthly during 1921-23: 'The premise of these excellent criticisms of Labour is the immediate coming of a Social Revolution, prevented only by the backwardness and treachery of Labour leaders' (Plebs League, What to Read. A guide for worker students (London 1923), 37); see also Macintyre, 494-5. Criticism of leaders was, of course, a long-established trade union tradition: see, e.g., Unofficial Reform Committee, The Miners' Next Step (Tonypany 1912; new edition London 1973).

33. Macintyre, 494; this view can be traced back to the Socialist Labour Party.



writings, such as Trotsky's, an ideological characterisation of the leadership was interwoven with a description of working class consciousness:

We see the traits of conservatism, religiosity, and nation arrogance in all the present-day official leaders.... It would be a great error to underestimate the powers of resistance and tenacity of these conservative peculiarities of the upper ranks of the British working class. By this, of course, we have no wish to imply that clerical and conservative-national tendencies are completely foreign to the masses. But at the same time, while the bourgeois-national traits have entered into the flesh and blood of the leaders..., in the working masses they have had an immeasurably less profound and stable character. 34

The assumption, then, remained that the working class was potentially, at least, more militant than its leaders.

This approach has been bolstered by some historians; the case is particularly well put by James Hinton and Richard Hyman. They argue that, in the early 'twenties, the effect of economic depression, unemployment, deteriorating working conditions was demoralisation, uncertainty and defensiveness. The rank and file confidence of the previous decade was reversed. For shop floor trade unionism, there was 'a new relationship of dependence on the union bureaucracies,'<sup>35</sup> whose strength was enhanced further by the enormous increase in size of the major unions (chiefly through amalgamation), and by the growth of national bargaining.<sup>36</sup> As a result, in the 1920s, 'the role of the union bureaucracy was more central to industrial relations than in any other period of British labour history'.<sup>37</sup> Now clearly this can

34. L. Trotsky, Where is Britain Going? (London 1970: first edition, 1925), 40.

35. J. Hinton and R. Hyman, Trade Unions and Revolution. The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party (London 1975), 18.

36. Ibid., 18-19.

37. Ibid., 22.

be distinguished from the debates of the 'twenties by its assertion that there was little rank and file militancy for the new bureaucracy to stifle; others, however, have combined similar estimates of the growth of a trade union bureaucracy with a profound belief in the militancy of the rank and file. As Brian Pearce writes,

wide sections of the workers became aware that the militant policy their new circumstances urgently demanded was being sabotaged by their officials. 38

These more modern versions are subject to one or both of two telling criticisms. First, the term 'bureaucracy' is employed in a manner which conflates the notion of a body of officials with that of the modes of behaviour and the internal relationships characteristic of bureaucracy in a Weberian sense. Yet a body of officials can have, a priori, no particular <sup>political</sup> role; and whilst there are many reasons for supposing that bureaucratic behaviour and relationships developed, there is no reason to presume that these were limited to full time trade union officials. Second, those who see the growth of bureaucracy as a means of restraining the militancy of the union 'rank and file' tend to focus their empirical research on certain key struggles, such as the General Strike. They find that these confirm their belief that militant members were betrayed by union leaders. Yet such findings are methodologically unsound: key struggles are, almost by definition, periods of militancy; and to focus on them encourages an excessive concern with tactics while ignoring, and even obscuring, the vital issue of how militant attitudes develop.

The second theoretical approach to labour in the 'twenties is often associated with the first. It is that the period saw a failure of revolutionary socialist leadership, and that this failure can be attributed to the political inadequacies of the British Communist Party,

38. Pearce, 'Some Past Rank and File Movements' in M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, Essays on the History of Communism in Britain (London 1975), 109.



or the Communist International (or both). <sup>39</sup> Clearly such a case must rest on the premise that the working class was in some way inherently revolutionary; adherents of this perspective also tend to concentrate their research in periods and places where militancy can be taken as read, and are subject to the same criticism.

The third approach is more substantial; it is implicit in much work on the early Labour Party. During the 'twenties, of course, the Labour Party began to accumulate large-scale electoral support; there has been a widespread assumption that it rapidly became a mass membership party after 1918. <sup>40</sup> Assuming these to be true, it is reasonable to argue that the political orientations of the leaders of the Labour Party are a significant factor in the development of the politics of the working class after the Great War. Several writers have argued such a case. In his Parliamentary Socialism, a work that can truly be termed seminal, Miliband avers that

of political parties claiming socialism to be their aim, the Labour Party has always been one of the most dogmatic - not about socialism, but about the parliamentary system. Empirical and flexible about all else, its leaders have always made devotion to that system their fixed point of reference and the conditioning factor of their political behaviour.... the leaders of the Labour Party have always rejected any kind of political action (such as industrial action for political purposes) which fell, or which appeared to them to fall, outside the framework and conventions of the parliamentary system. <sup>41</sup>

Certainly, in pursuing this theme through sixty years of the Party's history, the point is well taken. But Miliband is above all concerned

39. Woodhouse and Pearce, 1-178.

40. E.g., R. McKenzie believed that 'local Labour Parties grew rapidly in number ... after 1918': British Political Parties (London 1963), 482.

41 Miliband, 13.

to prove his point: he is not primarily concerned to show why the Labour Party adopted this position (though, incidentally, he makes some useful suggestions); nor does he demonstrate that, had the Party encouraged - say - industrial action for political purposes, it would have experienced any significant success.

Similar criticism may be directed at those who share Miliband's broad approach. Leo Panitch largely succeeds in his attempt to show that the essential 'ideology' of the Labour Party has always been 'integrationist' rather than 'disintegrationist' - that is, it sees society as essentially a unity, rather than as basically fissured.<sup>42</sup> But this explanation of how this became significant for the working class (through union/party links) is simplistic and undeveloped. David Coates does address the problem of working class conservatism and lack of revolutionary tradition, but his responses are merely preparatory to a similar essay in proving

that Labour Party politics cannot, and will not, culminate in the creation of a genuinely socialist society; and that, on the contrary, the Labour Party and its claims are a major blockage....<sup>43</sup>

His responses to the problem of working class conservatism (that is, to the claim that the Party's politics reflected working class political attitudes and behaviour, rather than influencing them) are not pursued in any depth: he merely contends that, at certain times in the twentieth century, the British working class 'might well have responded to very radical political leadership indeed',<sup>44</sup> and that the Labour Party itself has played an important role in shaping working class moderation, by providing definitions of 'politics' and 'working class interests' associated with parliamentary tactics and social reform.<sup>45</sup>

42. L.Panitch, 'Ideology and integration: the case of the British Labour Party', Political Studies 19, 1971, 184-200.

43. D.Coates, The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism (Cambridge 1975), v-vi.

44. Ibid., viii.

45. Ibid., viii-ix.



So, though these points are no doubt - to some extent - true, like Miliband's and Panitch's, Coates's argument is abstracted from discussion of working class consciousness, theoretical or historical.

There is a fourth approach to the development of British labour in the 1920s: this concentrates on the role of the state in preserving the political order. Two substantial theoretical contributions deserve our attention here: those of Foster and Keith Middlemas.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, Foster is one of the chief adherents of the theory of the labour aristocracy, and his discussion of the post-war situation is made somewhat arcane by his determination that this is best considered in terms of a version of that theory.

Lenin never used the term 'labour aristocracy' merely sociologically, to describe a stratum within the work-force. He was talking about a historical process, and a very special one: how, after labour had formed its class organisations, and after the anti-capitalist logic within them had started to become explicit, this 'conscious element' was nonetheless excluded and the dominance of bourgeois ideas maintained.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, such a definition of 'labour aristocracy', whether or not Lenin's, is so broad as to make a nonsense of the term. However, if we ignore this quasi-theological element, we are left with a substantial contribution at the level of state strategies. According to Foster, the strategy developed

was to surround the labour movement with a loose institutional framework that left it both apparently 'free' and 'autonomous' but at the same time decisively limited its scope.<sup>48</sup>

This was to be achieved at a national level, and in contrast to the 1840s

46. We discuss Middlemas's account here, since it shares several important characteristics with the Marxist contributions; properly, of course, it constitutes an alternative to Marshall's non-Marxist account.

47. Foster, 29-31.

48. Ibid., 32.

the containment of the conscious element rested far more directly on ideological and organisational manipulation (and hardly at all on the creation of distinct sectional cultures). Mainly it seems to have been ideological. A climate of opinion would be created by a growing battery of mass influence - newspapers, radio, the church, education, and the government itself. The labour leadership would be persuaded to adopt a course of action which would enable it to 'win' this public opinion. In doing this the leadership would both endorse the same assumptions within the labour movement and find itself forced into confrontation with those anti-capitalist elements that still opposed. Slowly, attitudes would be remoulded, come into line with those peddled by the establishment - even though remaining distinct and 'Labour'. 49

This strategy, says Foster, was worked out in three phases. From 1918-1922 Lloyd George was intent on maintaining some form of 'Lib-Lab' alliance, through reform and informal contacts with Labour leaders, which would prevent the emergence of a political Labour identity, retain the mass allegiances of the traditional parties, and leave the labour movement as a sectional, trade union, body. By 1922 this had failed: Labour's gains at the election encouraged Baldwin and Bonar Law to pursue a policy of 'educating labour' into constitutional channels, and encouraging the right throughout the Labour Party and the movement. While this was initially successful (leading to the failure of the Labour Government, and the return of the Tories with a large majority), the left in the trade unions made more progress than expected, producing the shock of 'Red Friday' in 1925. The result was that the Government adopted a new strategy: preparing for a short, head-on, assault on the Miners, to defeat the left in the unions and carry through a general attack on wages. This culminated in the General Strike. 50

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 31-45; for a critical discussion, see A.Reid and S.Tolliday, 'The General Strike, 1926', Hist.J. 20, 1977, 1001-1012.



Middlemas' discussion of the 1920s is in the context of an analysis of a period of 'political harmony' in Britain which lasted from the early 'twenties to the late 1960s: 'a continuum almost without precedent in post-Reformation history.<sup>51</sup> But Middlemas appreciates that this period was constructed out of a severe crisis of the state, lasting at least from 1911 to 1916 (and associated, inter alia, with industrial militancy, which was overcome in large part through profound developments in Government policy, especially over the years 1916 to 1926. The new policy was to promote the leading organisations of the two sides of industry from the status of interest groups to that of 'governing institutions' - bodies which have devolved upon them functions previously carried out by government, which share the government's basic assumption about 'national interests', and which accept broadly similar aims to those laid down by governments.<sup>52</sup> Initially, this process was pursued in a formal manner, through the 1919 National Industrial Conference; but after the latter's failure it was continued through more flexible, informal methods. By 1926 there existed a triangular system of collaboration between TUC, employers' organisations, and government.

But in return for this recognition by government, the 'governing institutions' were expected to accept national aims and (in practice, if not always in rhetoric) to shun class struggle; in addition, they were to discipline those elements within their ranks whose militancy had made the new political structure necessary. Conflict was thus displaced: rather than being manifested between the state and leading social institutions, it became internal to the latter. (In the case of the labour movement the disputes were increasingly between the TUC and the Parliamentary Labour Party on the one side, and union members, and workplace and local union organisations, on the other.)<sup>53</sup>

For our purposes, the overall validity of Middlemas's thesis is

51. Middlemas, 15.

52. Ibid., 373.

53. Ibid., 120-213.

of little significance:<sup>54</sup> we need not establish that the TUC and its employers' analogues in fact become 'governing institutions', nor that the political system can be accurately characterised by the term 'corporate bias'. Instead, what is of value is his description of government strategy, and his analysis of its objectives. In this, there is substantial common ground between Middlemas and Foster:<sup>55</sup> and it may be significant that both accounts

54. Substantial criticism, touching on the value of Middlemas's concepts, on his 'numerous errors of fact', and on his methodology, is to be found in R.Lowe, 'The Ministry of Labour: fact and fiction', BSSLH 41, 1980, 23-7, and in the review essay by M.Dintenfass in BSSLH 41, 1980 63-5.
55. Those who argue that a clear/<sup>state</sup>strategy toward labour was carried through during 1918-1924 have been implicitly criticised in a series of articles by R.Lowe: 'The failure of consensus in Britain: the National Industrial Conference, 1919-1921,' Hist.J 21, 1978, 649-75; 'The erosion of state intervention in Britain, 1917-24', Econ.Hist.Rev. 31, 1978, 270-89; and 'Ministry of Labour'. In effect, Lowe suggests that a central reason for the shift away from attempts to integrate labour, and toward a more aggressive attitude, was the structure of the civil service: in particular, the new Ministry of Labour was too weak, lacking 'the administrative resource and political weight to develop new policies and challenge the Treasury in Cabinet and in Whitehall' ('Erosion', 285). This is a valuable corrective to some arguments which err toward viewing the state as a fully rational agent; but although he may differ from other accounts in his explanation of government policies, his description and periodisation of these policies is not significantly different from Foster and Middlemas.



are empirically grounded in cabinet papers and the diaries of Tom Jones.<sup>56</sup> But one corollary of concentrating thus on governmental strategy is the - almost inevitable - temptation to accept official assessments of the working class threat. One critic has written of Middlemas's '(unspoken) assumption that the British working class remained at the doorstep of insurrection for virtually forty years', being held back solely by 'corporate bias'.<sup>57</sup> This is unfair, since Middlemas sees 'corporate bias' as fundamental, rather than epiphenomenal; but so far as the early 'twenties are concerned, it is a pointer to the truth. For neither Middlemas nor Foster attempts seriously to analyse working class consciousness, and both have a tendency to assume that the working class has a revolutionary essence whose emergence is prevented solely by factors external to the class itself.

These accounts, in the Marxist tradition, of the development of labour after the Great War, together with Middlemas's, have, then, two main strengths: they direct our attention to problems of political crisis and restabilisation, rather than treating them as unnatural and unimportant departures from an essentially ordered, peaceful, liberal evolution; and they have provided justification for important and

56. T.Jones, Whitehall Diary vol.I, 1916-1925, edited by K.Middlemas (London 1969).

57. Dintenfass, 65.

revealing research into union development, the national politics of the Labour Party and, state strategies. But they have several weaknesses, as we have seen: one they all share, and this is fundamental. They lack an adequate theory of the nature and generation of class consciousness: consequently, the subject of each study (union leaders, the Labour Party, the state, and so forth) is rendered for that study the independent variable on which working class political behaviour is dependent.

This failing is associated with, and in large measure permitted by, a methodological limitation of the studies discussed. Most concentrate on political developments at national level, whether in government, unions, or Labour Party: this is, ipso facto, to discount the importance of local political behaviour. Yet it is only by detailed, local, research that we can discover how political institutions and strategies relate to the experience of class, producing forms of action - or inaction. Of course, every local study is particular and partial; but studies of national political behaviour must make assumptions about local experience. In the absence of proper local research, there are a number of very real dangers. Contemporary leaders' or administrators' definitions of criteria will inevitably be accepted, even if critically. Contemporary assessments of popular mood may be accepted, for want of any other. Important differences between various groups or localities may be glossed over.

Our study attempts to overcome these two limitations in the existing literature. We examine the development of the labour movement, and its role in political crisis and restabilisation, by means of a local study; and we do so in the light of a theory which relates the movement and its institutions to the development and nature of class consciousness. It is with the elaboration of this theory that our next chapter is concerned.



## Chapter 2

### Consciousness, Action, and Labour

#### 2.1 Introductory

This chapter has two purposes. Firstly (in sections 2.2-2.5) it expounds a theory, at a quite general level, which grounds our study. This theory is concerned with how working people, and the institutions of the labour movement, are motivated to act collectively and politically. Throughout our study we concentrate on the motivation and mobilisation of labour; our theory therefore deals primarily with these matters. We are only incidentally concerned with the processes by which labour imposes its will on, or is dominated by, other social groups. Our theory lays stress on the fragmentary nature of popular belief, in two respects: 'consciousness' is seen as consisting of many varied, and not necessarily consistent, elements; and classes are seen as consisting of groups, each with (potentially diverse) consciousnesses. Secondly, in section 2.6, the argument of the remainder of our study is outlined.

#### 2.2 Motives and political action

Like all political organisations, labour organisations exist in order to achieve certain objectives. In order to do so, in a class-divided society, they must generally induce representatives of the ruling class<sup>1</sup> to concede these objectives. To this end, they can adopt two methods: they can argue a case effectively to those who hold or exercise power; or they can themselves mobilise power resources. This is not, however, a simple matter of a dichotomy between reason and coercion, for these two elements are almost invariably intermingled. In particular, the mobilisation of power resources is - especially for working class politics - itself an ideological process: that is, one requiring engagement with the beliefs and assumptions of those people who constitute the power resources of labour.

1. The term 'ruling class' is used in a very generic (but essentially Marxist) sense; no attempt is made to distinguish between different categories of dominant group (cp, e.g., A.Giddens, The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies (London 1973), 118-27), although some general statements are made about how a ruling class asserts and maintains power.



For the fundamental source of power for labour politics is the working class itself - or, more precisely, action that the working class takes. This can enable labour to impose its objectives, in certain circumstances, on groups which would not willingly accede to them. Of course, the working class need not always be mobilised as a whole. Sections, too, have power, and they can exercise it either in their own interest (as when, say, a trade union organisation induces its members to strike for a pay increase) or in the interest of other sections of the working class (as in 'solidarity' action), or of the class as a whole. Clearly, too, the type of mobilisation varies: the Labour Party, for instance, has characteristically been interested in a limited mobilisation (to vote 'Labour') of the entire working class (and other social groups also); shop stewards, however, may seek a more militant response from a more limited membership. But, whatever the 'constituency' the political organisation may seek to mobilise, it must confront the problem of 'legitimising' the action desired (or, indeed, any action): that is, it must justify the proposed course of action in the eyes of those 'constituents' from whom action is demanded. Producing legitimising arguments in this way is not, in principle, different from producing arguments which will legitimise the objectives desired by the labour organisation in the eyes of a ruling class group: here again, it is a matter of justifying action, though perhaps action of a different kind, and in relation to a group with different social and political outlooks.

We should not, however, build up a picture of political organisations identifying objectives in a rational, scientific, way - and then developing the ideological resources required to achieve them. Such an image would distort and oversimplify. For while objectives can be simple, obvious, and universally agreed within an organisation, they are perhaps more often complex, unclear, and contested. We should distinguish ultimate aims from immediate objectives. The former, though important, are not our central concern. Their relevance to us here is that, having been agreed, they constitute a source of arguments justifying action on immediate objectives. But these, short term, objectives should not be seen as rationally selected (that is, as though the selection of the objectives normally precedes the search for



effective means of legitimising them). Rather, the selection of an objective by an organisation (or by an individual) is preceded by its emergence as an issue, and this is, of course, a highly ideological phenomenon. Thus there is, for instance, an enormous number of political developments which would be in the interest of the labour movement, but which are not pursued because there is no realisation (collective or individual) that they are matters of significance - that is, they are not perceived as issues. Yet, failing this, they cannot become objectives for organisations.

At this point it is useful to consider the concept of a 'legitimising principle'. In a valuable contribution to the literature of workplace industrial relations, P.J.Armstrong, J.F.B.Goodman and J.D.Hyman suggest

that in any cultural setting there are certain acceptable motives for action (what we will call 'legitimising principles') which are, in turn, embedded in the characteristic world view (ideology) of that culture. 2

This 'vocabulary of motives' - stock of legitimising principles - is limited in any instance (though not immutable). Thus, for example, a trade union activist, in attempting to mobilise his members, must couch his policies in terms of motives acceptable to them: if he does not (or cannot) his policies will not gain the desired support. The position is essentially similar in relation to a political activist - but rather more complex. Conversely, if a trade unionist is attempting to gain a concession from his employer without resorting to coercive methods, he must engage with the latter's 'vocabulary of motives', which is unlikely to be identical with his own; a political organisation hoping, say, to gain a concession peaceably from a local council must

2. P.J.Armstrong, J.F.B.Goodman, J.D.Hyman, Ideology and Shop Floor Industrial Relations (London 1981), 36. At several points in ss. 2.2 and 2.4 our discussion draws on this valuable study of motivation and mobilisation in three medium- and small-sized factories.

similarly engage with their stock of legitimising principles.

We must bear in mind, however, that trade union and political activists, and the organisations to which they belong, are not external to these 'cultural settings': thus their vocabularies of motives are likely - to a greater or lesser degree - to coincide with the latter's. This is, though, to simplify, for even politically active individuals and organisations are actors within these 'cultural settings', shaping them to some extent. In many respects, the role of the political organisation is to criticise and develop the vocabulary of motives available to a social group. Certainly this is true of a radical (as opposed to a populist) political body, which is concerned to lead the social group to which it relates in a direction the latter would not otherwise take. Thus the position both of the individual political activist, and of the political organisation, is complicated. The individual's set of legitimising principles is likely to draw both from his or her own social group, and from the political organisation; the political organisation will draw on both its members' vocabulary of motives, and on other sources (for instance, a local political party will draw on the propaganda of its national institutions).

We are here approaching the problem, much-discussed by Marxist writers, of 'spontaneity and conscious leadership':<sup>3</sup> of how far the working class is able to take action without the intervention and leadership of a 'conscious element', and of how conscious elements can operate most effectively. We cannot formulate an adequate response to this problem without discussing class consciousness; before turning to such a discussion, however, it is necessary to re-emphasise one point which, thus far, has only been implicit. Legitimising principles have both private and public roles. In the absence of appropriate legitimation,

3. This phrase is from A.Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (London 1971), 196; the classic Marxist discussion is, of course, V.Lenin, 'What is to be done?' in Selected Works, Vol.1 (Moscow 1970), esp. 141-97, but see also G.Lukacs, 'Spontaneity of the Masses, Activity of the Party' in his Political Writings 1919-1929 (London 1972), 95-105.



grievances may not even be capable of articulation in a person's mind, let alone adequate to constitute mobilising issues for groups. Even where the individual is clear in his own mind, and able to find legitimation which satisfies him, mobilisation will be ineffective unless this source of legitimisation (or some other which works) is shared by relevant others. Similarly, grievances or demands may be legitimised by principles accepted only by relatively small groups (say, by a local community), and thus incapable of producing mobilisation adequate to effect change; or they may fail because the legitimising principles, though widely accepted, are generally judged in the particular case to be outweighed by others.

### 2.3 Contradictory consciousness and class action

The dominance of theories of value consensus in the explanation of social stability has been severely eroded in recent years. This erosion has come from two directions. Within the mainstream of sociology, a series of empirical and critical works has shown precisely the lack of value consensus in modern capitalist societies.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the advocates of the notion of 'false consciousness'<sup>5</sup> (which asserts the existence of value consensus, but denies its validity) have had their central position within the Marxist tradition challenged through the increasingly widespread and sophisticated awareness of Gramsci's writings.<sup>6</sup>

In his survey of the sociological literature, Michael Mann found four 'trends' emerging:

4. Mann, 'Social cohesion', and Westergaard, 'Cash nexus', survey much of this literature.
5. E.g., G. Lukacs, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in his History and Class Consciousness, Studies in Marxist Dialectics (London 1971) 83-222; H. Marcuse, One Dimensional Man (London 1972).
6. Initially, Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' was widely perceived as a version of false consciousness: e.g., G. Williams, 'Gramsci's concept of "hegemonia"', J. of the History of Ideas 21, 1960, 586-99; J.M. Maravall, 'Subjective conditions and revolutionary conflict: some remarks', Brit. J. Sociol. 27, 1976, 21-34. The literature on Gramsci is now immense.

1. value consensus does not exist to any significant extent;
2. there is a greater degree of consensus among the middle class than among the working class;
3. the working class is more likely to support deviant values if those values relate either to concrete everyday life or to vague populist concepts than if they relate to an abstract political philosophy;
4. working class individuals also exhibit less internal consistency in their values than middle class people. 7

Now there is, clearly, no reason, a priori, why such trends should apply in an earlier period, although Gramsci's (albeit less methodologically sound) observations echo these. More important, Gramsci's work provides the fundamentals of a theory which would lead us to regard 'a profound dualism in the worker's situation and his consciousness'<sup>8</sup> as normal in a capitalist society. According to Gramsci, the worker's 'practical activity', his class situation, 'involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it', but does not require or produce a 'clear theoretical consciousness' of this activity, nor of his class situation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Gramsci suggests that the latter can be 'historically in opposition' to the former, continuing:

One might almost say that he [the worker] has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. 10

The importance of this 'verbal' consciousness is that it provides the

7. Mann, 432.

8. M.Mann, Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class (London 1973), 68.

9. Gramsci, 333; cp Mann, 'Social Cohesion', 435.

10. Gramsci, 333.



basis for general attitudes and explanations, for theoretical understandings of the wider world:

It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, with varying efficacy [sic] but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity. 11

This 'passivity', however, is its product chiefly in the case of the worker, the 'active man-in-the-mass', for it is among the working class that the greatest contradiction between 'practical' consciousness and 'verbal' consciousness is to be found.

What, then, are the sources of these two theoretical consciousnesses? Gramsci's answer seems to be that verbal consciousness normally represents the values of the ruling class: the working class has 'for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group'.<sup>12</sup> Practical consciousness, on the other hand, is generated by the requirements of working class life under capitalism: a verbal consciousness derived from superior social groups is (almost literally) unrealistic for the working class, which modifies its elements to make them more relevant to its own real world.<sup>13</sup> Practical consciousness is thus not untheoretical, nor are its elements incapable of articulation (though they may be inconsistent, one with another). Indeed, the importance of practical consciousness is above all that it is, for the working class, the form of consciousness which governs action:

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 327.

13. Cp F. Parkin's notion of a 'subordinate value system' as 'a "negotiated version" of the dominant value system': Class Inequality and Political Order (St. Albans 1972), esp. 91-2.





It signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes - when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. 14.

The problem with such a consciousness is that it is inevitably limited, for four main reasons. First, because it is developed in the actual experience of the working class under capitalism, its relevance is to relatively specific and localised cultures (local communities, workplaces, industries, and so on), rather than to the working class as a whole. Secondly, the practical consciousnesses of different working class groups are unlikely to be consistent, and are often contradictory. Third, for these reasons it lacks generality and cannot be opposed to a verbal consciousness developed by a social class with national power through national institutions; finally, it in any case lacks comparable institutional strength. So whilst there is a constant tension between practical and verbal consciousnesses, the former is severely limited.

Broadly similar interpretation has led others to conclude that 'Surges of class consciousness are continually undercut by economism, and capitalism survives'.<sup>15</sup> Gramsci is not so fatalistic. There is 'a struggle of political "hegemonies" and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper'.<sup>16</sup> For in

14. Gramsci, 327.

15. Mann, Consciousness and Action, 68.

16. Gramsci, 333. The terms 'hegemony' and 'direction' here originate in Gramsci's assertion that class power and bourgeois power in western societies in particular, cannot be based solely on coercion. 'Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one's own side which one wishes rapidly to assimilate, and whose "good will" and enthusiasm one needs'. (Gramsci, 168).

Capitalist production, of course, does need at least some working class 'good will' - certainly it operates less efficiently without it. So it is necessary to base capitalist rule on a system which wins the consent of the subordinate (ruled) class: such a system Gramsci terms 'hegemony' or 'direction', as opposed to forms of 'domination', based on coercion. (On this distinction see P. Anderson, 'The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', NLR 100, 1976-77, 21-5; Gramsci, 57-8). The need to achieve direction, in this sense, does not imply that class rule involves no important element of coercion.



addition to the limited 'direction' which can be given to the working class by 'practical consciousness', Gramsci sees in the working class political party a source of oppositional 'verbal consciousness' as well as of political direction in the more immediate, Leninist, sense. The role of the party is to develop and support a system of values which legitimises action in the interests of the working class, 'to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level'.<sup>17</sup> as well as to lead the action itself. However, these two elements are directly and intimately related, for several reasons. First, the party is not simply a receptacle of revolutionary knowledge and consciousness, which is passed over to the unconscious working class: on the contrary, there is an essential continuity between sectional consciousness, practical consciousness, and class consciousness:

it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity.      18

This is achieved, moreover, in an 'educational relationship', where 'the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher'.<sup>19</sup> The party thus develops, but also learns from, spontaneous class activity, from the 'flashes' of class consciousness; for '"pure" spontaneity does not exist in history...':

in such movements there exist multiple elements of 'conscious leadership', but no one of them is predominant or transcends the level of a given social stratum's 'popular science' - its 'common sense' or traditional conception of the world.      20

Thirdly, the party is itself formed in this interaction, as is its outlook,  
17. Gramsci, 258.

18. Ibid., 331.

19. Ibid., 350.

20. Ibid., 196-7; see also 198.

its 'philosophy': and

creating a group of independent intellectuals is not an easy thing; it requires a long process, with actions and reactions, coming together and drifting apart and the growth of very numerous and complex new formations. 21

This approach, then, treats the Marxist party not as a fixed, unchanging historical subject, but as an active participant in historical processes; more important, perhaps, it allows us to treat the party as an entity with characteristics in common with other elements of working class 'conscious leadership'. Moreover, we should not necessarily identify Gramsci's notion of 'the party' with the Comintern model: whilst Gramsci subscribed to the latter in practice, the party's role and development, rather than its specific organisational form, are central to his theoretical discussion, which often stretches the Leninist theory of the party (not to mention the Comintern version of Leninism) to its limits, or beyond.<sup>22</sup> So although we must guard against the tendency to conflate different forms of 'conscious leadership' and different forms of class consciousness and activity, we are dealing with a theory which recognises such different forms - treating their role as an historical question, and not a priori. In particular, whilst Gramsci accepts broad categories of working class leadership (trade unions, reformist parties, Marxist parties),<sup>23</sup> the categorisation of any particular organisation is an empirical question, requiring a study of its political activity and development.

Let us summarise the discussion of this section. Working class consciousness is highly fragmented, but involves two key elements, 'verbal' consciousness (normally adopted from the ruling, or hegemonic, class), and 'practical' consciousness, which originates in the realities of working class life under capitalism. The former tends to cement nations

21. Ibid., 395-6.

22. M. Johnstone, 'Marx and Engels and the Concept of the Party', Socialist Register 1967, 121-58, is a useful corrective to the view that Lenin merely made explicit a single, Marxist, notion of 'the Party'.

23. E.g., Gramsci, 52, 181-2.



around central, institutional, values, and militates against working class adoption of consistent, oppositional values. The latter tends to structure working class action, generally of a sectional kind, but the contradiction between these two consciousnesses hinders this, and makes structured, national action highly problematic. The role of the party is to develop a 'verbal consciousness' which legitimises working class action in its own interests, and thus to enable the working class to become a hegemonic, directive class: in order to achieve this, it must engage with the 'practical consciousness' of the working class.

#### 2.4 Legitimising principles and contradictory consciousness

Following this digression into the world of ideology, we are in a position to pick up the threads of our earlier discussion. One problem with the schematic presentation of the last section is that, whilst it stresses the fragmentary character of class consciousness, it gives us no concrete idea of its content; nor of the specific forms in which consciousness relates to action. This is the value of the concept of 'legitimising principle', introduced in section 2.2; for the legitimising principle is an element of consciousness which precisely legitimises action, and action of a (more or less) specific kind.

Before turning to the legitimation of working class action, we should consider the implications of our discussion of ideology for the legitimation of capitalist class action. We have noted the essential coherence and consistency of the system of dominant values; and we have noted the strength of the institutions which generate and reproduce it. This tends to make the exercise of power ideologically relatively unproblematic. For example, rights over property, buttressed by the legal system, themselves legitimise a variety of actions in defence of property: definitions are relatively clear, and even the possible courses of action are often specified. In addition, of course, we have seen that dominant values are in many cases reproduced in the verbal consciousness of the working class. This has the effect of providing further legitimacy for the values or principles concerned, and tends to

weaken oppositional trends among the values of dominant social groups. More importantly, as we have seen, it undercuts working class opposition to ruling class action, for it tends to legitimise such action in the eyes of workers.

This picture may suggest that a dominant value system, in the sense proposed by Frank Parkin,<sup>24</sup> legitimises all, or most, ruling class action, and prevents working class resistance. It has, thus far, many of the characteristics of a theory of false consciousness, of a dominant ideology accepted by the working class. We have seen that the reality is far more complex: this applies to dominant values, as well as to working class consciousness. To begin with, dominant values do not constitute a system (in the sense of a coherent and consistent set of principles which directly reflect class interest). Partly, no doubt, this is due to the historical development of the ruling class, and particularly to the tensions between its capitalist and aristocratic (or feudal) elements; it is also the result of occasional working class action. In many cases this has led to the growth of 'a secondary structure of supportive argument',<sup>25</sup> which can limit class action. It is, for example, one thing to assume the prerogatives of property; it is another to argue that these are necessary to the national well-being or individual freedom. Whilst the latter additions may render any action taken more acceptable to the subordinate class, it also increases the problems of mobilisation - it makes action more problematic. Moreover, there appear to be principles within the consciousness of both classes which do not obviously reflect class interests: consistency, relevance, precedent, for example. These also have some effect in restricting action, though they may have more impact in situations of strongly institutionalised conflict - in workplace industrial relations, for example.<sup>26</sup>

24. Parkin, 82-8.

25. Armstrong et al., 41.

26. For a discussion of these in a workplace context, see *ibid.*, 95-107.



There are, then, constraints on the types of ruling class action for which legitimisation is available: by the same token, there is room for working class groups to legitimise resistance by reference to principles which are common to ruling and working classes. It is not necessary for all working class resistance to be explicitly based in oppositional values, in the 'practical consciousness' of the working class (although it may be that the basic motive is to be located there): indeed, unless power resources are to be mobilised, it is essential to engage with the dominant vocabulary of motives if resistance is to be successful. This may be seen as, and may in some cases consciously be, a strategic deployment of certain dominant values by workers: very often, however, the legitimising principles deployed are motives for workers themselves, and are not simply used instrumentally.

The working class is not, however, dependent solely on its ability to exploit contradictions among ruling class values - 'theoretical consciousness'. Legitimation for action can also draw on principles associated with the 'practical consciousness' of the working class. But the limitations of such consciousness impose several limitations on the range of action which can be legitimised, particularly when contrasted with the extent of legitimation available for ruling class action. Whereas the latter is more or less consistent, largely representative of class interests, the legitimation available to the working class is contradictory and fragmented. In contrast to the generality of many legitimising principles available to the ruling class, the working class must normally make use of principles which are relatively specific, and of limited application. Only abnormally are there available to the working class legitimising principles which - in their generality - compare with principles such as order, profit, national interest, and so forth, which are commonly available to the ruling class and its subgroups.

Finally, we should emphasise one central fact, which is implicit in Gramsci's notion of contradictory consciousness: legitimation is often contested. Principles which might legitimise action are

available to many parties: which, if any, eventually do lead to action depends on the character of the principles concerned (together with certain factors which we discuss in the next section). For example, an employer may attempt to persuade his employees to accept a wage cut by referring to principles such as profit, the power of the market, and the need to be efficient; a union may respond by referring to notions of equity, a living wage, and so forth. Both are potentially effective legitimisers of action (or passive acceptance). Taken overall, the principles available to the ruling class tend to outweigh those available to the working class, but this is by no means an iron law: workers very frequently do take action which their rulers or employers oppose. Moreover, the relationship between the principles available to opposing social groups shifts from time to time: it is sometimes useful to refer to this relationship as a 'balance of legitimation', and the nature and direction of alterations in this balance form an important element in our study.

## 2.5 Power resources and class structure

We now turn to two factors which affect the actual power which a social group is able to exercise; for the existence of a principle which legitimises action says, in itself, nothing about the success or failure of the action taken. These factors are, firstly, the cohesion of the social group, and, secondly, the nature of the institutional resources available to it.

Politically, the importance of the legitimising principle is that it motivates collective action: our interest, therefore, is in principles which are acceptable motives to aggregates of people. But motives are valid only in specific contexts:

Motives are of no value apart from the delimited societal situations for which they are the appropriate terminologies. They must be situated. ... Motives vary in content and character with historical epochs and societal structures. 27

27. C.Wright Mills. 'Situating actions and vocabularies of motive', Amer.Sociol.Rev. 5, 1940, 913.



Of course, some motives are acceptable more widely than others, as the motives of nationalism often transcend class . But even within social classes, we cannot assume the universal validity of politically important motives for action, since classes themselves contain a multitude of structural fragmentations, on some of which important social groups are based. The latter develop, to a greater or lesser extent, social institutions and understandings - in short, 'practical consciousnesses'-; and if a class is to take concerted action, principles must be found which constitute valid motives for all or most of these groups.

As a general rule, therefore, classes (and groups) are more likely to act in concert when they are internally relatively homogeneous, rather than when they are highly differentiated. This is, of course, something of a commonplace. But while any class is riven with - intersecting - structural fragmentations, the most significant are those which form the basis of groups with their own peculiar modes of behaviour and views of the world. There are two complicating factors here. First, highly cohesive groups may be exceedingly effective at legitimising action in their own interest, while their very cohesion intensifies their distinctiveness from other groups: in short, strong group loyalties may weaken class identification. We may perhaps view the labour aristocracy as an example of this (although the case would be arguable). Secondly, just as many fragmentations in class structure intersect, so individuals may belong to a number of different groups: at work, in their local communities, at home, and so forth. Where several different groups (as judged by their structural bases) share the same members in large measure, it may be appropriate to refer to a single group for some purposes; for they may share a common vocabulary of motive. We may take the 'occupational community' to be an example here, where the social relations of work intersect closely with those outside work.<sup>28</sup>

Very often, therefore, the mobilisation of the working class (or substantial sections of it) involves the deployment of principles, which

28. Cp, e.g., D.Lockwood, 'Sources of variation in working class images of society', Sociol.Rev. n.s. 14, 1966, 249-67, and the literature stemming from this seminal contribution.



will legitimise action for highly diverse groups; by implication, it also involves the development or discovery of such principles. But, so far as an organisation (say, a political party or a trade union) which is attempting to achieve class or group action to a common end is concerned, a problem may exist. There may be no effective principle which will legitimise action to a desired end by a sufficiently large number of groups: it may therefore be necessary to mobilise to a somewhat different end by deploying a somewhat different principle, but one which will be more widely effective. We may regard this as a process of negotiation, in which alliances or coalitions are formed: these exist on the basis of a limited range of commonly valid motives (sometimes very few), but may encompass a wide spectrum of social groups, even transcending class divisions.

There are, then, difficulties involved in the mobilisation of highly diverse groups of people. Even if action can be achieved, however, its success will substantially depend on the resources available. We can perhaps best approach this factor by way of a simplification. Any social group has available to it, at any one time, a specific set of resources (social, political, and economic institutions, people, and so on). A legitimising principle can, at best, enable all of these to be mobilised to a common end: more commonly it will mobilise only some of the resources available. Perhaps more important, no legitimising principle can mobilise resources which do not exist, so a social group which is small in number, and which lacks significant institutional sources of strength, will remain weak - however united it is in its sense of grievance. Of course, the reality is somewhat more complex. The resources available to social groups are not fixed, and indeed the effect of some principles is just to enable new resources to be formed (a trade union, for instance, once formed, constitutes a lasting institutional resource for workers). On occasion, the set of resources can expand, contract, or change in character, with great speed. But the essential point remains valid: no motive, however strong and widely felt, can mobilise resources which are absent.

'Institutions', of course, are of many kinds: to treat them unambiguously as sources of strength is highly misleading. Taken together, the institutions of a social group determine how that group will respond to any situation: some constitute sources of political



strength. Thus a trade union for a group of workers; thus a political party for an entire class. But institutions which are strong for one purpose may be ineffective for others, or may induce a group to respond to a situation in a specific way - say, by encouraging images of the situation which are inappropriate.

Finally, we should sound one note of caution. No institution is an island, unaffected by its cultural and political setting. This applies as much to the political institutions with which we shall be largely concerned (parties, trade unions, and the rest) as to any other - despite the self-images, of autonomy and independence of thought, which the former often have. Naturally this does not imply that all institutions are identical: but each must be studied in its context; and each will respond to certain motives, but not to others.

## 2.6 The historical argument

Our theory, then, proposes that working class consciousness is most profitably to be viewed as highly fragmented: consisting of widely varying, and often mutually inconsistent, beliefs and assumptions about aspects of the world. Some are adopted from the ruling class, and form the basis for generally expressed attitudes (verbal consciousness); others are generated by working class institutions themselves, but tend therefore to be specific to their class or group situation (practical consciousness). The structure of the working class intensifies this fragmentation of consciousness, for each group within the class develops its own (more or less) different practical consciousness. Political action is thus most effective when a motive for action (what we have termed a legitimising principle) is shared by a wide spectrum of groups; but it is also deeply influenced by the relative strength - both institutional and ideological - of opposing classes, groups, or organisations. Parties (in the widest sense: encompassing trade unions and similar bodies) develop and deploy legitimising principles so as to encourage action to certain ends. Very often, this requires the deployment of principles which appeal to the leading institutions of other social groups; or to other leading institutions within their own group.



This theory forms the basis of our study; although it is necessary, from time to time, to elaborate on it in various ways. Our historical argument runs thus. During and immediately after the Great War, the working class movement in Britain made significant advances. In part, these were based on changes in economic, social and political structures, which increased the relative strength of the resources available to workers. But fundamental to the advances, and particularly to their character, was a shift in the terms of legitimation. There were several aspects to this shift, of which three are outstanding. Firstly, the experience of war altered the terminology of nationalism: the meaning of the 'nation' was inevitably expanded, and the purchase of the working class on the legitimising principles associated with the language of 'nation' increased. In short, there was a distancing of this language from the ruling class, and consequently its ability to mobilise around this set of principles became more problematic: conversely, the working class was more able to mobilise in its own interests around such principles. Secondly, the war involved a substantial erosion of the legitimacy of 'profit'. Much of the linguistic apparatus of capital, which can normally be treated as virtually synonymous with profitability, developed relatively independent meanings: 'organisation', 'efficiency', associated now increasingly with national interest rather than profit (and with a national interest more open to working class interpretation), came to be used in attempts to mobilise for the war effort. This was a managerial language through which there was greater - though still highly circumscribed - room for the legitimation of self-interested working class action. Thirdly, this language, associated with and bolstered by the apparatus of wartime planning, inevitably lent some legitimacy to versions of socialism, and thus to the development of the labour movement.

But just as the strength of these notions opened up opportunities for the labour movement, so they strongly influenced the movement's own development. The language of planning, efficiency, organisation, and so forth, provided the essential meaning-system through which other radically significant influences were interpreted. The Russian Revolution of October 1917, for example, which might have been seen



from the perspective of workers' control and democracy,<sup>29</sup> became an instance of efficient class organisation and planning. These notions also grounded many of the important changes in the structure of the Labour movement during our period, especially up to 1921 or 1922. Restructurings of the Labour Party, of the trade union movement, and of Marxist organisation, were all significantly motivated by the strength of this language among the working class.

The extent of the working class advance was not sufficient to overturn the essential power structure: and from 1920 onward a number of economic factors began to shift the balance of power away from labour. The strength of many of the legitimising principles generated by the war was eroding, making working class mobilisation more difficult; whilst economic developments brought the language of 'efficiency' once more into a close liaison with 'profit' (at least in industrial usage), making managers' tasks less arduous. At the same time, the counter-attack against labour could, in general, not be based upon the same principles as had been used before the war, so that (especially outside industry) labour was able to achieve significant mobilisation. The legitimising principles which were used in the counter-attack were based around notions of constitutionalism and democracy: this had the effect of strengthening an important element of the labour movement, and encouraging it to concentrate on a parliamentary strategy. Broadly, therefore, labour was again brought under some control, but only by virtue of allowing it important areas of legitimate advance.

Interwoven with this argument are a number of related themes. Two deserve mention at this stage. Firstly, an argument is developed concerning notions of organisation and their impact on labour. We suggest that the strength of the language of 'organisation' was associated with severely limited images of organisation: this meant that the entire labour movement could concur, in the years just after the war, on organisational 'advances' which were later to be used most effectively in strengthening the right within the movement (at the expense of the left). Secondly,

29. Cp O. Anweiler, The Soviets. The Russian Workers', Peasants', and Soldiers' Councils, 1905 — 1921 (New York 1974); J. Hinton, The First Shop Stewards Movement (London 1973), 298-329.



we examine the shifting pattern of allegiances within the labour movement; we argue that alliances and coalitions were based around key sets of understandings, and that the immediate post-war years were a key period of reassessment of these. By the mid-'twenties a network of alliances had grown up within the movement, with important institutional support, which (in most situations) guaranteed the dominance of parliamentary and reformist politics.

Our argument is constructed in the following way. Part II introduces the social and economic context of the study. In chapter 3 we see that Edinburgh's working class was relatively highly fragmented, although this fragmentation declined in some respects after 1900, and especially during and after the Great War; we see that its middle classes were also far from cohesive; and we see that in many respects the city's economic performance from 1917 until 1927 mirrored that of the national economy. In chapter 4 we examine, on the one hand, the economic foundation of certain structural fragmentations, and conclude that these were significantly eroded during the war and the post-war years with which we are concerned. We are thus able to suppose that, during these years, the working class was becoming more receptive to concerted political mobilisation (although we cannot, on this basis alone, say that such mobilisation would necessarily take place, nor specify its form). On the other hand, we look at certain aspects of the working class standard of living, and suggest how these might have influenced the ability and inclination of the working class to take action at various times during our period.

In part III we are concerned with the processes by which labour's industrial strength waxed and waned during and after the war. It is necessary in chapter 5, to take issue with a 'conventional wisdom' concerning the development of the capitalist economy in later nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain: we argue that it ignores the central importance of short-term factors in the development of work organisation; and that it obscures the extent of uneven development, and the importance of less 'advanced' sectors of industry. We also criticise the notion that there is a simple, linear direction of capitalist development, especially as it affects the organisation of work.



And we examine the development of management thought (in relation to work organisation), and contrast it with the reality of work organisation in our period. In the light of this we are able, in chapter 6, to examine the development of work organisation in four of Edinburgh's main industries. This has three purposes: it illustrates the extent of differentiation between (and even within) industries; it shews how various industries and strategies had to confront essentially similar economic conditions, and how they did so; and it prepares the ground for an informed investigation of union organisation and mobilisation, which is the function of chapter 7. Here the argument concerning the availability and deployment of legitimising principles is developed, in relation to trade unions: we see how advances were made between 1917 and 1920, but we also identify profound limitations in the advances achieved - limitations which were exposed during the 'twenties. We also suggest that, in certain respects, images of organisation then available limited the ability of the trade union movement to overcome these limitations in the 'twenties.

Finally, in part IV, we examine the growth of labour politics. Chapter 8 begins by discussing the relationship between trade union and political action; it then briefly surveys the origins and growth of labour and socialist politics in Edinburgh, before shewing how the war shifted their institutional and motivational context. We argue that this shift led to the development of two definitions of political action: one stressed the power of the state (and had an optimistic attitude to Labour's ability to win control of it); the second stressed the political role of trade union action. These definitions cut across both the normal division between left and right, and the wartime alliances grouped around attitudes to the War. In chapter 9 we shew how a number of factors combined to permit the reorganisation of the labour movement between 1917 and 1921; vital factors were the manner in which the intersection of bases of allegiance had weakened pre-war alliances within the movement (and pre-war organisational boundaries), and the strength of the motivational language of 'efficiency' and 'organisation' in all sectors of the movement. In chapter 10 we explore the processes whereby two shifting, but essentially coherent, coalitions built up within the movement by the mid-'twenties. The weaker, in general, was

that, whose core was the Communist Party, but which drew on traditions of 'direct action'. That which emerged to dominate drew on the language of parliament, democracy and the constitution, and assumed the viability of an electoral strategy. In part, the latter's dominance was due to the increasing erosion of the motivational basis of direct action: from 1920 onward this ceased to be credible, save as a primarily industrial strategy in periods of heightened industrial conflict.



Part TwoEdinburgh: Social Structure and Economy

'A war of position is not, in reality constituted by the actual trenches, but by the whole organisational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the rear of the army in the field.'

Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 234.

'The workers should note the important fact which is established in the [Royal] Commissioners' Report, that in the past the majority of workers did not receive sufficient wages to provide them with adequate accommodation, and that in the future the problem will be increased.'

Edinburgh Trades Council,  
Annual Report 1918, 16.

'Slums and slum-dwellers are the products of a system which perpetuates poverty, adds daily to the number of poor, and makes it the easiest thing in the world for the poor to remain poor.'

Labour Standard, 25 December 1926.

## Chapter 3

### Edinburgh after the Great War

#### 3.1 Introductory

Our study is, then, essentially concerned with three related categories of questions: about the nature of class domination during and after the Great War; about the role of labour, in particular, in the processes of domination and subjection; and about how the labour movement operated and developed within this context. It is a local study because this seems an effective method of addressing these questions, and one which (as we saw in chapter 1) has been too rarely employed. Although our conclusions from such a study can, at best, be only illustrative, the choice of Edinburgh is not wholly arbitrary. As we shall see, there were a number of respects in which Edinburgh was not untypical of other towns - although, of course, in some ways it was unique. Above all, Edinburgh was not a city of exemplary working class militancy, nor a city in which the Labour Party made substantial advances in municipal government between the wars: in contrast to the majority of existing studies of the local development of the labour movement.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter sets the scene for the remainder of our study. We look at Edinburgh's urban development and how this affected the city's working class. We discuss the city's middle class, their political attitudes and institutions. We look at its industrial structure, and the structure of the working class. And, finally, we examine how Edinburgh's economy fared during the years of our study.

1. Cp, e.g., Hinton, First Shop Stewards Movement; S. Macintyre, Little Moscows. Communism and Working-class Militancy in Inter-war Britain (London 1980); and the conference papers by T.Lindley, K.Teanby, H.Mathers, and J.Rowett reported in BSSLH 39, 1979, 10-13.



### 3.2 Urban development

By the turn of the century, Edinburgh had passed its period of most rapid growth. Between 1851 and 1901, in a 'typically Victorian as well as distinctively local' experience,<sup>2</sup> the city's population had risen by 86 per cent: rather less than that of more heavily industrialised Scottish cities, such as Glasgow and Dundee, but reflecting the same factors - the development of its industry, and the depopulation of rural Scotland.<sup>3</sup> By 1901 over 300,000 people lived within the municipal burgh (over 380,000 if Leith was included), but thereafter the population stabilised: indeed that of 'Edinburgh proper', the parliamentary burgh (excluding Leith and Portobello) actually fell by 1.5 per cent over the decade 1901-11. The census figures suggest that this essential stability persisted through the two decades, 1911-31, which are most relevant to our study: although on certain definitions the population began to grow again, the growth was exceedingly modest in comparison with the Victorian pattern (see table 3.1).

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Table 3.1		<u>Population of Edinburgh 1891-1931</u>				
		1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population		338114	384732	385016	393456	405399
<u>Inter-censal population</u>						
<u>increase (per cent):</u>						
Edinburgh		14.8	13.8	0.1	2.2	3.0
(Dundee		9.2	3.9	0.7	5.1	4.3)
(Glasgow		15.8	10.2	-4.7	72.5	-0.7)

Notes: Parliamentary burghs; 'Edinburgh' includes Leith and Portobello, but excludes Musselburgh (part of East Edinburgh parliamentary division from 1918).

Source: Census of Scotland, 1931.

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Post-war Edinburgh was, therefore, in an important sense a Victorian artefact. Along with the population's growth had gone marked

2. R.Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh (Oxford 1976), 10.

3. But the difference is not so great as Gray implies; Glasgow's population rose 89 per cent., Dundee's 101.5 per cent, but a misprint gives the Edinburgh figure as only 80 per cent. (Ibid.)

changes in its spatial distribution and social composition. In the Old Town of the eighteenth century,

The social ranks were not segregated by street or quarter but simply by the level of the tenement they occupied, with the wealthier or nobler families living in middle floors high enough to be spared the worst of the smells which filled the streets and lower apartments but not so far up the stairs as to make for a wearisome climb. 4

During the early nineteenth century the construction of the New Town planned for the wealthy, reduced (although it did not eliminate) 'unpleasant contact between the classes',<sup>5</sup> a trend which was intensified during the second half of the century by the development of middle-class suburban estates largely to the south of the city. At the same time, and especially during the 1870s and 1880s, the construction of working-class housing began: and it followed the pattern of class segregation now set. Uniformly working-class areas were created, grouped around railways and industry in such districts as Dalry, Gorgie, Abbeyhill, Easter Road; and, with the middle-class emigration from the Old Town, it too became more uniformly working class.<sup>6</sup> The pattern of social segregation set before the turn of the century was little altered before the outbreak of War. Coinciding with the stagnating population growth the years 1900-1914 saw a profound slump in house-building in Edinburgh, and it was working-class housing, heavily dependent on small, local capital and quick sales, that suffered most:<sup>7</sup> 'buildings lay unfinished and potential landlords kept their money in their pockets.'<sup>8</sup>

4. B.Elliott and D.McCrone, Urban Development in Edinburgh: a contribution to the political economy of place (Paper presented to the 9th World Congress of Sociology, 1978)(mimeo, University of Edinburgh), 1.
5. T. Adams, 'Town Planning and Housing', supplement to Architectural Review May 1910, 311-16, quoted in H. Richardson, J.Vipond, R.Furbey, Housing and Urban Spatial Structure; A Case Study (Farnborough, Hants. 1975).
6. Richardson et al., 9-10.
7. Elliott and McCrone, 17-20.
8. Ibid., 20.



The continuity of secular trends may obscure significant, shorter-term, developments; and it is probable that the discussion above under-states, by omission, the importance of the war. The wartime inter-censal decade saw, as table 3.1 shows, a very modest rise in the population of Edinburgh. During the war, however, there was a substantial influx of workers into the city, as Rosyth, a major base and dockyard for the Grand Fleet, mushroomed; as lesser units of the fleet were stationed at other ports on the Forth, such as Granton;<sup>9</sup> and as wartime production took off generally.<sup>10</sup> No clear figures are available as to the precise size of this immigration: it was sufficient, however, to place acute pressure on housing in the city, and to necessitate the Admiralty's planning a new town at Rosyth.<sup>11</sup> The pressures of wartime also affected the extent of social segregation within the city. Accounts of urban spatial development generally stress the extent to which the Victorian trends were intensified in the 1920s, as

open development allow[ed] of the creation of coherent areas of development not only housing one social stratum of the City's community but separated by open space. 12

Yet this emphasis on continuity telescopes two periods of intensifying spatial segregation: the intervening period, in which social segregation was somewhat eroded during the war, is eliminated. And, in fact, the post-war programmes, which led to the creation of suburban areas of working class housing, made little impact until the later 'twenties.<sup>13</sup>

9. A.J.Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, vol.3 (Oxford 1966), 228, vol.5 (Oxford 1970), 130,144; J.R.Jellicoe, The Grand Fleet 1914-16. Its creation, development and work (London 1919),78.
10. Cp B.Waites, 'The effects of the first world war on the economic and social structure of the English working class', SLHSJ 12, 1978, esp. 21-2.
11. TC AR 1917, 12.
12. D.Keir (ed.), The Third Statistical Account of Scotland. The City of Edinburgh (Glasgow 1966), 374.
13. See s. 4.6. below.



Nevertheless, the essential pattern of population growth and social segregation had been well-set: post-war Edinburgh was, in social-geographical terms, polarised between, on the one hand, a bourgeoisie resident in the New Town and the suburban south of the city; and, on the other, a working class occupying housing on land of relatively low value hard by the industrial areas. The main working class areas thus formed a band running from Leith in the north-east, through Easter Road, Abbeyhill and Meadowbank in the east, and then onward through the Old Town to Gorgie and Dalry in the west.<sup>14</sup>

The housing in the central areas was a mixture of the former dwellings of the wealthier townspeople, now departed to New Town and suburbs, and newer, often ill-constructed, speculative tenement blocks custom-built as working-class housing.<sup>15</sup> The former,

divided and sub-divided until a five or six apartment house has become five or six dwellings, and six or eight houses entering from one stair have become thirty or forty, with a population often over one hundred persons, <sup>16</sup>

had lost their former glory: the latter had no pretensions to lose. Within these areas, the problems characteristic of Victorian urban deprivation persisted: overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, poor and deteriorating states of repair. Along with these went higher death, infant mortality, and morbidity rates, a fact which was the subject of several surveys, as well as recurring annually in the reports of Medical Officers of Health and Chief Sanitary Inspectors. In 1919, for example, seven of the city's sixteen wards had population densities greater than 78 per acre; of the remainder, only one had a density greater than 37 per acre. In St. Leonard's, the figure was 243 per acre and, in certain areas, over 600.<sup>17</sup> A sense of the living conditions in such areas is well-conveyed in the report of a parish minister in 1922:

14. G.Gordon, 'The Status Areas of Edinburgh: a historical analysis' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1971), 172; Richardson et al., 24-5.
15. By 1900 there were also about 1,400 houses built for workers by the Edinburgh Co-operative Building Society: but many of these were too expensive for many workers. Gordon, 94-5.
16. A.W.Ritchie, Chief Sanitary Inspector of Edinburgh, Housing: Improvement and Clearance Schemes in Populous Areas (Edinburgh n.d. [c.1930]), 2.
17. Edinburgh Public Health Department, Annual Report 1919; a Joint-Committee of the Presbytery of Edinburgh and of the United Free Church Presbytery of Edinburgh, The Housing of the Poor in Edinburgh (Edin. 1922), 6.



within sight of the South Bridge, No. — Street, an old tenement, is the dwelling of about 70 persons. It has four flats of one-room and two-room houses, with seven tenants in each flat. ... the walls of passages are decayed. The stairs are filthy and littered. In not a single apartment is there water, gas, a press, or a meat safe. ... In each lobby is one sink and one water-closet; there are three or four families in each lobby. Men coming home from a day's work wash at the cold water tap in view of anyone passing. 18

Another minister described conditions for the eighty or ninety residents of a tenement built about 1860. 'The whole building is in a state of disrepair, the walls of the rooms cracked and dirty, and the ceilings ready to fall'. 'Bugs' had 'a firm lodgement in the cracked walls and ceilings and in the floors;' even fumigation, apparently, gave relief only for 'a week or so, the livestock temporarily emigrating to a neighbouring house, only to return when they were at liberty to do so.'<sup>19</sup>

There were few improvements in these conditions during or after the war: such improvements as there were are revealed statistically, rather than as a process whose reality was evident to contemporaries. The city's Chief Sanitary Inspector, writing at the end of the 'twenties, considered that efforts to improve housing since 1890 had been 'meagre in the extreme':

they have only touched the fringe of the problem, and have failed to alter the position very much for the slum dweller. 20

The Public Health Department's figures for population density show a steady downward trend after the War (as they show a marked increase between 1914 and 1919) for the central, working class, wards of the city;<sup>21</sup> these, however, were based on estimated ward populations about which there must be some doubt. The only other available statistical indicator of overcrowding (and in many ways an heuristically more valuable

18. Ibid., 10. Emphasis in original.

19. Ibid.

20. Ritchie, 4.

21. See table 4.19.

one) suggests that in some respects the problem intensified: it shows a rise in the number of households living in just one, or two, rooms, both during and after the war.<sup>22</sup> Most of the statistical data, published annually by the Public Health Department, is also based on the dubious population figures; one exception (the infant mortality rate: see table 3.2) does show some improvement during the post-war decade. If

Table 3.2

Infant mortality in Edinburgh, 1914-30.  
(rates per 1000 births)

	1914	1919	1922	1925	1928	1930
Edinburgh (a)	110	117	85	94	70	78
Edinburgh (b)			91	96	75	82
Wards:						
Canongate	117	127	109	113	61	108
Morningside	33	82	65	86	31	13
Merchiston	83	87	30	58	40	47
St. Andrew's	125	134	91	144	91	108
St. Giles'	151	150	141	146	111	106
Dalry	115	114	72	80	71	64
St. Leonard's	140	160	92	119	88	102
N. Leith			140	128	100	93
C. Leith			128	107	86	58
Colinton			20	75	12	74

Notes: (a) pre-1920 boundaries; (b) post-1920 boundaries: viz, including Leith, and Liberton, Colinton, and Crastorphine and Cramond wards.

Sources: Edin. Public Health Department Annual Reports, each year.

any conclusion can be reached from so confused and contradictory a set of data, it is perhaps that where improvements in the health of the population were achieved over our period, they were achieved by reason of factors other than improvements in the purely physical environment:

22. See table 4.20.



by changes in diet, welfare facilities, income, attitudes, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

Edinburgh between 1918 and 1926 was, therefore, the product of Victorian growth tempered by the pressures of war. There had, however, been very important developments in transport and communications, concentrated in the first decades of the twentieth century (and the last of the nineteenth), but also taking place during the 'twenties.

By the 1860s Edinburgh's rail links with London had been established: its first suburban railway line was not opened until 1884,<sup>24</sup> however, and although the bulk of the suburban network was built by the turn of the century, it was not quite completed even in 1914.<sup>25</sup> Essentially this network provided links between middle-class residential areas,<sup>26</sup> allowing the further suburban development of the city. It seems that the railways were not especially successful at securing working class passengers, except on specific routes (most notably, the journey to Rosyth):<sup>27</sup> and this problem intensified during the 'twenties as the road network improved. Several stations, and two branch lines, were closed to passengers between 1920 and 1925.<sup>28</sup>

Transport in and between working class districts was therefore provided chiefly by tram and 'bus. At the end of the war the Edinburgh tramways, a steam-driven cable network, was the fourth largest in the

23. On these factors, see J.M.Winter, 'The impact of the first world war on civilian health in Britain', Econ.Hist.Rev. 30, 1977, 487-507.

24. Keir, 428.

25. Richardson et al., 25.

26. Ibid., 26.

27. Until December 1922, free transport was provided by the Admiralty for employees of Rosyth Dockyard who lived in Edinburgh. When these were discontinued ('on the ground that it was no longer justified as the necessity for employing men residing in Edinburgh was passed': T&LC minutes, 9 January 1923) the fare rose to 8s6d. See also T&LC minutes 19, 26 December 1922, 16 January 1923.

28. D.Hunter, Edinburgh's Transport (Huddersfield 1964), 162-6, discusses rail fares and the threat from roads. See also ss.6.8-6.9 below.



world, with 36 miles of track. By 1925, converted to electric traction, the network had grown to  $39\frac{1}{2}$  miles, and continued to expand.<sup>29</sup> The first corporation motor 'buses arrived in the city in January 1914, eight years after the Scottish Motor Traction Co. had begun to operate in the surrounding area. Serious development only began after the war: by 1925 there were 37 miles of routes in the city;<sup>30</sup> by 1939 there were  $69\frac{3}{4}$  miles, and 18 services.<sup>31</sup> In addition to providing more relevant routes than the trains, the trams in particular were required, by law, throughout this period, to provide cheap fares for the 'labouring classes' before 8 a.m. and after 5 p.m.<sup>32</sup> This relative price advantage did not extend to 'buses, a fact which may account for the 'pro-tram' attitude of the local labour movement; though its attitude to 'buses was also coloured by the corporation's determination that their main terminus should be at the foot of the Mound - precisely where labour, and socialist, open-air meetings had long been held.<sup>33</sup>

Without doubt, the working class was more mobile within the city: Edinburgh had never, of course, been large enough to make journeys within it impractical on foot; but speed was now increased. It was quite possible, for instance, for a man comfortably to live in Dalry and travel daily to work in Leith; or for a man living in Edinburgh to commute to Rosyth.<sup>34</sup> By the same token the distinction between Edinburgh and Leith

29. Ibid., 92; Keir, 406; M.F.Huq, 'The Urban geography of the heart of a city: with special reference to Edinburgh' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1960), ch.6.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., ch.7; Keir, 407.

32. Keir, 410-11.

33. Cp T&LC minutes, 17 September 1918; 21 June, 19 August 1921.

34. A corollary was that engineering employers refused, after 1923, to pay accommodation allowances to outworkers working in nearby towns. During negotiations on this, the employers' representative asked: 'is it such a dreadful hardship to sit in a [tram] car with your morning paper [?] I suppose you do take time to read [?]' To these sallies, the AEU negotiator responded 'You cannot read in the Edinburgh cars; it is impossible! ESAE&I and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings ' in re outworking allowances', 22 January 1923, 6-7.



became increasingly artificial: as it became possible for the inhabitants of the port to travel into central Edinburgh simply for a meeting, so the political institutions of the two towns merged. The amalgamation of the Leith and Edinburgh Trades Councils in 1921 was simply an acceptance of the new reality.

This improvement in transport facilities had an important effect on the labour movement: it made possible, still more than previously, the hastily-summoned meeting. One other condition was necessary for this, however: rapid communication. This was, perhaps, par excellence, the period of rapid postal services, especially within the city. The secretary of the Trades Council could, for instance, summon an evening meeting of his executive committee by dispatching letters or postcards in the morning. This

Table 3.3

Trade Union Telephones in Edinburgh

<u>Year ending</u> <u>31 March</u>	<u>Trades and Labour</u> <u>Council officials.</u>	<u>Trade Union secret-</u> <u>aries and organisers</u>
1923	0	0
1924	0	1
1925	0	1
1926	1*	17
1927	2*+	18
1928	7*+	23
1929	5*	23

Notes: \*: includes Trades and Labour Council's legal adviser, a solicitor, at his office.

..... +: includes Trades and Labour Council secretary.

Source: T&LC Annual Reports, each year.

was unusual: but even excluding the possibilities of the telegram, messages could be rapidly conveyed. During the early 'twenties, however, few of Edinburgh's trade unionists were frequent users of the telephone. The first telephones had been installed in the city as early as 1879; by 1911 there were about 12,000 in Edinburgh and Leith. By 1925 this figure had grown to 20,000, and in October 1926 the first automatic exchanges were installed - a process which permitted a doubling of the

number of telephones over the following decade.<sup>35</sup> But very few of these belonged to trades unionists, as table 3.3 shows.

### 3.3 The middle class and its politics

Edinburgh's reputation as a non-industrial town, as a centre of law, medicine, teaching, ran deep; and not least in the consciousness of its labour movement, for whom it was both an explanation of non-achievement, and a cause for extra self-congratulation at what was achieved. In the mid-1930s Arthur Woodburn, a prominent product of the Edinburgh labour movement, identified - in the course of a brief 'anti-history' of the city - four key social groups which had created 'Edinburgh and its atmosphere': the Church, the Law, Medicine, and commerce.<sup>36</sup> 'Labour', he observed,

has not found it easy to make headway  
in this atmosphere of tradition,  
authority and middle-class culture.  
Even in the case of most working-class  
families, some of their members are  
connected with occupations quite outside  
trade union or socialist influence. 37

Amongst these occupations supposedly immune to trade union influence he included the professions, domestic service, shop assistants and (perhaps ironically, in the light of his own background) clerks.

Woodburn's analysis of the city's structure accords in many ways with the picture offered by census records. (See table 3.4). The proportion of the population occupied in administration, the professions, and personal services was considerable, at least in relation to other Scottish cities. Edinburgh housed the Scottish Office, and therefore

35. Huq, ch.6; Keir, 254-5.

36. A. Woodburn, 'Edinburgh and Social Progress' in The Labour Party Annual Conference Edinburgh 1936 (souvenir brochure and programme), 13-18. Woodburn was by then Scottish Secretary of the Labour Party; he was Secretary of State for Scotland, 1947-50.

37. Ibid., 19.



a large civil service; and whilst the absolute size of the professional group was accounted for largely by lower-status occupations (such as teachers and nurses), in relation to other cities, the proportion of lawyers was remarkable - reflecting the capital's role in the Scottish legal system, but also serving the city's commercial and financial institutions. For

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Table 3.4      Administration, Commerce, Professions and Personal Service as percentage of total occupied populations 1921

	<u>Edinburgh</u>	<u>Glasgow</u>
Commerce and finance	11.82	10.84
Public administration and defence	4.08	1.83
Professional occupations	7.29	3.59
Personal service	12.34	7.23
<u>of which:</u>		
Ministers, clergymen	0.28	0.12
Lawyers	0.47	0.09
Physicians and surgeons	0.30	0.15
Sick nurses	1.00	0.63
Teachers	2.17	1.26
Civil Service	1.85	0.49
Commercial travellers	0.85	0.86
Finance and insurance	0.63	0.46
Domestic servants	7.38	3.15

Source:      Census occupation tables, 1921.

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Edinburgh was also a major centre of finance, insurance and banking: 'probably the largest centre of industrial capital in the world in relation to its size',<sup>38</sup> according to Woodburn - a judgement which may have been tinged with a perverse local patriotism, but was not incredible. During the early 'twenties there were at least ten major insurance companies with head offices in the city,<sup>39</sup> as well as 'some of the world's largest Investment Trusts... and the Head Offices of several Banks.'<sup>40</sup>

38.    Ibid., 17.

39.    J.Reid, The New Illustrated Guide to Edinburgh Historical and Antiquarian (Edin.n.d./ c.1921/), 121; Keir 580-2.

40.    Woodburn, 17. Woodburn was a well-known popular author on finance: cp, e.g., The Banks and The Workers (NCLC, London, 1925) and An Outline of Finance (NCLC, London, n.d./ c.1928/). See also Keir, 575-8, 583-5.

Leith, a major port with by far the largest overseas trade on the east coast of Scotland (and in the early 'twenties rivalling Glasgow in the value of its imports, though not its exports),<sup>41</sup> also sustained a significant commercial middle class.

Woodburn's analysis omitted one important factor in the formation of Edinburgh's middle class, however. The city's system of private education was unusually highly-developed. The Merchant Company schools were its core: formed from the seventeenth century onward for the education of the daughters and sons of the city's merchants, they were reorganised after 1870 to service the children of the new middle class of Victorian, industrialised, Edinburgh.<sup>42</sup>

It was this middle class which the reformed Merchant Company schools were intended to serve, and the education provided ... appealed to the needs and desires of that class in Scotland. <sup>43</sup>

By our period the capital's private schools could provide an education for virtually all the children of the middle class, and generally a child received his or her tuition at a single school from the age of five onward. So it was both a purposeful schooling, committed to the establishment and maintenance of a middle class, and - within this class - universally available. Perhaps the single most telling indicator of the size of Edinburgh's middle class is provided by the numbers employed in domestic service. These were considerably greater, as a proportion of the occupied population, than in Glasgow; and although there was some tendency to convergence between the cities during the 'twenties, even in 1931 Edinburgh's proportion was over 50 per cent greater. The outstanding feature, however, was the rapid decline in numbers of domestic servants during the war years: even after a steady rise through the 'twenties, fewer domestic servants were employed in Edinburgh in 1931 than in 1911.<sup>44</sup>

41. See below, s.3.4

42. J. Stewart, The Organisation of Education in Edinburgh (Edin. 1925) 39-43; Keir, 774-9.

43. Stewart, 41.

44. In 1921, 21,985 were employed in 'Personal Service' in Edinburgh; in 1931, 27,876 were - a rise of 26.8 per cent. In Glasgow, the rise was 38.0 per cent, but the percentages of the industrial populations in Personal Service were 15.0 in Edinburgh, 9.7 in Glasgow, in 1931. See N. Milnes, A Study of Industrial Edinburgh and the Surrounding Area 1923-1934 (London 1936), 36-46.



The city's middle class was far from homogeneous: it encompassed professional, administrative, commercial and industrial elements. During the nineteenth century, the divisions between these sections had been marked.

A section of the professional middle class retained an identity linked to the traditional role of the city in national life, as a centre of law and administration, and a focal point in the social life of the landed class; other professional and business groups were associated with the economic changes of the Victorian period. The city's notorious snobbery seems to have derived from the social and political rivalries encouraged by this heterogeneity of the wealthier classes. 45

This 'snobbery' was as marked - or, at least, as remarked upon - during the 1920s. 'Of course we have a good share of snobbery here,' wrote the Trades and Labour Council's secretary in 1927,<sup>46</sup> whilst an Edinburgh sociologist recorded in 1936 that

The West End of Edinburgh, though only too ready to welcome the casual stranger, acts rather differently to those who live within the city. Here in fact, social classes are sharply defined, status may almost be said to exist. 47

Yet at the same time there do appear to have been changes. The standard of living of the most wealthy seems to have suffered, and there is some suggestion that the compartmentalisation of the various sections - the law, medicine, banking, and so on - began to break down after the Great War.<sup>48</sup> It is indeed probable that the city's internal 'snobbery' was associated with its apparently cosmopolitan establishment. Edinburgh was a cultural metropolis, particularly for the Scottish bourgeoisie, in a manner unrivalled by other cities, but this was in large part dependent upon the openness of its bourgeoisie to outside influences.

45. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 20.

46. G.W.Crawford, 'Foreword' in Edinburgh T&LC, Souvenir of the Trades Union Congress at the Synod Hall Edinburgh (Edin., 1927), 6.

47. Milnes, 4-5.

48. Cp, e.g., the comments of Lord Cameron in Keir, 453-6.

In fact, the legal profession in the city fulfilled national functions, whilst the medical had if anything a wider frame of reference. The city's financial institutions in this period were relating more and more to international - rather than local, or even Scottish - areas for investment.

Whilst the cosmopolitan establishment of the city may have played a central role in maintaining the key institutions which gave the city its peculiar 'atmosphere' or 'culture', it does not appear to have concerned itself greatly with Edinburgh's day-to-day management. Two major (though by no means mutually exclusive) groups dominated the affairs of the Town Council. (See tables 3.5 and 3.6). In 1925, 57 per cent of councillors were owners of property (housing, land, or commercial) other than their own homes; whilst 53 per cent were businessmen: of the latter, it seems that many were of the petite bourgeoisie, shopkeepers and the like, whose horizons would rarely have been raised wider than the city. In

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Table 3.5      Occupations of Edinburgh Town Councillors 1905-1935  
Percentages of all councillors:

	1905	1925	1935
Professionals	20	20	9
- lawyers	(12)	(6)	(3)
Businessmen	52	53	55
- retailers	(25)	(20)	(26)
Craftsmen	23	10	7
Higher administrative workers	2	-	-
White collar workers	-	4	6
Manual workers	-	-	10
Housewives	-	3	10
Not given	3	10	4
No. of councillors:	50	70	71

Source: B.Elliott, D. McCrone and V. Skelton, 'Property and Politics: Edinburgh 1875 to 1975', table 4.

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contrast      the professions were a relatively small (and declining) grouping on the Council; and many of them appear to have been members of lower-status professions, such as estate agents. There was, however, an important distinction between the two major groupings: where the



property interest was declining (and its representation shifting in the direction of managers, rather than owners, of property), the proportion of businessmen was growing.

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Table 3.6      Property ownership by Edinburgh Town Councillors  
    1905 - 1935

	Percentage of all councillors:		
	1905	1925	1935
Owning any property other than own residence:	72	57	45
Total no. of properties owned:	1370	631	512
Source:	Elliot McCrone and Skelton, table 1.		

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Increasingly, therefore, local affairs were conducted by men (there were very few women) of local orientation, whose concern was for the efficient administration of the city: although they borrowed from the intellectual elite a sense of the city's history and greatness, this was interpreted in the light of axioms of efficiency and good government which owed as much to principles of sound business administration as to any coherent political philosophy. Indeed, a major claim of the ruling groups on the Town Council was that they were 'non-political'; and the effectiveness of this claim is well shown by its ability to restructure bourgeois politics in Edinburgh in 1928 (creating the Progressive Association from a number of loose-knit groups of Tories, Liberals and independents).<sup>49</sup> The immediate mobilising issue in this was the growth of Labour representation on the Council, with its greater discipline and more clearly articulated policies, which was - in the majority's terms - bringing politics into local government. Paradoxically, of course, this more intense sense of the localism and non-political nature of city administration occurred precisely during the

49. From c.1920 onward these groups had been co-operating, by mutual tacit agreement, on an anti-socialist basis: see ch.10 below.

period when central government was requiring local councils to become far more the agents of national policies, and national policies which were increasingly contentious. Housing was the main case in point: local councils had both to provide public housing and encourage speculative development; but in addition its responsibilities for relieving poverty, and the distress caused by unemployment, were becoming ever more onerous during the 'twenties. And, with the growth of national labour and trade union institutions capable of articulating policies in relation to these, and with greater Labour representation locally, it became more difficult for the local council to escape charges of being 'political', and operating in its own interests.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.4 The Working Class

The formation, and constant regeneration, of a working class is intimately associated with the development of economic and industrial structures. Edinburgh's working class had been formed in a city whose

industrial structure was ... heterogeneous, with a considerable amount of smaller-scale, labour intensive industry and a consequent diffusion of ownership. The relationships of industrial employment did not figure prominently in local affairs. 51

In its early twentieth century development, the city remained true to this essence. As we have seen, its political leadership did not, in general, come from industrialists; and although the proportion of the working population employed in relatively large-scale concerns (such as rubber manufacture, brewing, engineering) seems to have grown, the city's industrial units remained small in national terms. The largest single

50. The final two paragraphs of this section draw heavily on B.Elliott, D.McCrone and V.Skelton, Property and Politics: Edinburgh 1875 to 1975 (mimeo, University of Edinburgh, n.d./c.1978/), esp. 16-24.

51. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 21.



employer, for example, was St. Cuthbert's Co-operative Association, whose workers were mostly employed in its small branches; the largest industrial employer (The North British Rubber Co.) had a workforce of rather less than 5000 at its largest during the period 1923-1934.<sup>52</sup>

Table 3.7

Size of firms in Edinburgh

Among firms employing 20 or more:

<u>Group</u>	<u>Total No. of Insured Workers</u>	<u>No. of Separate Firms</u>	<u>Average No. of insured Workers per firm</u>	<u>Highest and Lowest Nos employed by any Firm</u>	
Building and Contracting	4777	102	47	590	14
Printing	5426	48	113	621	20
Bread and biscuit manufacture	2134	14	152	1010	20
Rubber	4221	7	603	3270	42
Engineering	3190	31	103	549	21
Drink (manufacture)	2694	29	93	588	21
Paper, etc.	2611	11	237	580	29
Oils, etc.	3731	15	249	721	30
Shipbuilding	932	3	311	515	117
Construction and repair of motor vehicles	1121	18	62	188	25
Cardboard box, etc.	498	6	83	151	38
Furniture etc.	776	18	43	146	20
Chemicals	305	4	76	170	20
Hemp. etc.	561	1	561	-	-
Cocoa, choc. and sugar manufact., confectionery	837	7	105	497	20
Hosiery	442	3	147	384	26

Note: The figures refer to 1931.

Source: N. Milnes, Industrial Edinburgh, 1936, 117.

In table 3.7 we have perhaps the clearest indication of the size of workplaces in Edinburgh's manufacturing industry: it is evident from

52. Milnes, 114.

this that the Castle Mills of the North British Rubber Co. was very much the exception in a pattern of medium-to-small-sized industrial plants.

In this important respect, the city, though perhaps not so untypical of British towns as a whole, does not coincide closely with the common view of the industrial structure of early twentieth-century Britain, in which the basic industries of Victorian capitalism (ship-building, engineering, textiles, and so on) dominate towns and cities, bringing workers together in increasingly large units of production wherein the antagonistic relationships between capital and labour are more clearly defined;<sup>53</sup> and in which the relationships (of hierarchy, for example) originating within the workplace are carried in a fairly simple and direct way into the social structure of the working class community.<sup>54</sup> In Edinburgh, on the contrary, the bourgeoisie, though conspicuous, was not clearly and directly associated with employment and exploitation; the working class was structurally highly fragmented, and not only in terms of stratification within a handful of industries - it was also divided between industries, and a large number of enterprises and workplaces within each of these. As one local managing director put it, in Edinburgh

It frequently happens that a working class family of father and several sons and daughters represents half a dozen completely different trades. 55

So although one important study found 'a strong degree of workplace-residence association' in Edinburgh's working class areas,<sup>56</sup> these cannot usefully be thought of as 'occupational communities' unproblematically supporting attitudes of 'proletarian traditionalism'.

The distinctive industrial structure of the city can be gauged by comparing it with Glasgow's at the same time (see table 3.8).

53. Cp, e.g., E.J.Hobsbawm Industry and Empire (Harmondsworth 1969), 174-6, for such a view of the growth of factory production.

54. Cp, e.g., J.E.Cronin, 'Coping with Labour, 1918-1926' in J.Cronin and J. Schneer (eds), Social Conflict and the Political Order in Modern Britain (London 1982), esp. 120-25; C.Chamberlain, 'The growth of support for Labour Party in Britain', Brit.J.Sociol 24, 1973, 474-89.

55. J.Waterston, 'Labour in Edinburgh' in T.Stephenson(ed), Industrial Edinburgh (Edin.1921), 92.

56. Gordon, 174; the main (partial) exception to this was the concentration of railway and brewery workers in the Meadowbank-Abbeyhill area.



Of some of the major differences we are already aware: there was in Edinburgh, a far greater proportion employed in the professions, and in personal service.

Table 3.8 Distribution of working population by industry, 1921 (per cent)

		<u>Edinburgh</u>	<u>Glasgow</u>
I	Fishing	0.45	0.01
II	Agriculture	1.57	0.34
III	Mining, Quarrying	1.97	1.57
IV	Bricks, Glass, pottery	0.54	0.72
V	Chemicals, dyes	1.07	1.09
VI	Metals, machines	9.63	27.42
VII	Textiles, textile goods	1.33	3.54
VIII	Skins, leather goods	0.40	0.49
IX	Clothing	3.09	5.07
X	Food, drink, tobacco	5.26	5.19
XI	Woodworking	2.07	2.48
XII	Paper, printing	5.61	2.79
XIII	Building, decorating	3.97	3.47
XIV	Other manufacturing	3.07	1.28
XV	Gas, water, electricity	0.90	1.43
XVI	Transport, communication	9.65	10.32
XVII	Commerce, finance	19.70	16.59
XVIII	Public administration	9.94	6.39
XIX	Professions	7.98	2.89
XX	Entertainments, sport	0.77	0.64
XXI	Personal service	10.93	6.21
XXII	Other industries	0.09	0.06
	Total	99.99	99.99
	Total industrial population	201224	488599

Source: Census of Scotland, industry tables.

In many industrial groups (for instance, transport and communications, mining and quarrying, food, drink and tobacco manufacture) there was little to choose between the two cities. However, Glasgow had roughly twice the proportion of its working population occupied in clothing and textiles; while the most substantial difference came in the category described by the census as 'manufacture of metals, machines, etc.', but which, may, without excess simplification, be referred to as the engineering industry. This under-representation of engineering meant,

on the one hand, that Edinburgh had no major concentration of its working population in a single manufacturing sector, with which to offset the employment in commerce, finance and the professions. More significantly, however, engineering was an industry central not only to technological innovation, but to the innovations in industrial organisation of the period,<sup>57</sup> and it was also the industry which, above all, constituted the infrastructure of an industrial economy. Enterprises within industrial centres based on a single industry, and above all within those based on engineering, tended to be highly inter-connected and inter-dependent: Edinburgh, lacking such concentration, did not develop such intense inter-relationships. By the same token, it did not build up a working class with a close experience or understanding of other major enterprises in the city: there were inevitably not the same opportunities for mobility between jobs in different industries; neither could those remaining within one enterprise have so clear a conception of working conditions in other local firms.

Edinburgh's working class was, then, highly fragmented, both by industry and by workplace. Although many had, no doubt, some knowledge of a variety of industries and occupations, the basis for a deep common experience was absent. Before turning to examine Edinburgh's economic performance in the 1920s, however, we may tentatively point to one further dimension of fragmentation. Lord Provosts and similar civic dignitaries are no doubt prone to make comments on the 'justifiable pride' they feel in their cities' 'existing industries and the quality of their products', with 'craftsmen ... capable of holding their own anywhere'.<sup>58</sup> But even more independent investigators found it 'obvious ... that pride in good workmanship is a main characteristic' of Edinburgh.<sup>59</sup> This reputation had been developed in the nineteenth century, when the city's middle class had been an unusually large luxury market, encouraging small-scale, craft production. After the Great War, the reputation had been detached from its origins, being applied now to manufacturing industry.

57. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, 289-90; idem, 'Custom, Wages and Work-load in Nineteenth Century Industry' in Labouring Men, esp. 359-69.

58. Sir W.J.Thomson, 'Edinburgh as an Industrial Centre' in Scottish Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Commerce between Scotland and the Empire (Glasgow 1934), 11.

59. Milnes, 15.



But it does serve as a reminder that Edinburgh's (relatively under-capitalised) industry was unusually dependent upon skilled labour. We look at this phenomenon, and its importance, in more detail in later chapters.

### 3.5 Edinburgh's economy, 1917-1927

Surveying Edinburgh's economic record during the 1920s from a standpoint in the mid-'thirties, Nora Milnes was struck by its close approximation to national trends: her work is permeated by a sense that Edinburgh was a microcosm of the British economy. This assumption was based, largely, on the city's industrial heterogeneity, and on the statistical finding that

From 1923 [when her study began] to the middle of the year 1929 the curve of unemployment from the Edinburgh area is practically that which represents the experience of Great Britain as a whole. 60

In fact, inter-war Edinburgh's industrial structure was not identical with that of the national economy; indeed, according to one study,

Within the field of the 38 basic industries, ... a higher average expansion than for Britain as a whole could be expected to apply to Edinburgh, on account of a favourable industrial structure. 61

In this section we examine how Edinburgh's economy stood up to the economic winds of our period, and some of the reasons why this optimistic expectation was not fulfilled.

Edinburgh's strength was not uniform - a fact which Milnes' generalisation tends to obscure. In summing up the employment experience of the Edinburgh area, she included the coal-mining areas of the Lothians - whose industrial politics impinge but rarely on our study. More important, she swept Leith into Edinburgh - a move which draws our attention away from the important differences between Edinburgh and its port. As a more recent study recorded,

60. Ibid., 12-13.

61. C.E.V. Leser and A.H. Silvey, 'Scottish Industries during the inter-war period', Manchester School 18, 1950, 165.

in the days of depression, the Port of Leith suffered much like a Clydeside town, though its Siamese relationship to Edinburgh obscured, statistically at any rate, the extent of its economic woes. 62

Leith's economy was closely bound up with its port (the largest on the east coast of Scotland), and with shipbuilding and ship repairing: its industrial structure was far more akin to that typical of the west of Scotland. If, therefore, we now examine the direction of the economic winds, and their temperature, we do so in the knowledge that their effect throughout the city was not uniform.

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought an initial dislocation to the Scottish economy, so largely dependent upon exports and international trade. There were redundancies, for instance, in the paper industry, as manufacturers feared for their supplies of imported timber and esparto grass. In Edinburgh, £20,000 was raised for a fund for the unemployed. But, in the longer term, the war brought many benefits. The war effort sustained a high level of demand, even if it originated in government spending, and brought inflation. In the war materiel sector, investment was encouraged - even if this meant a switch away from other sectors. Yet the latter was hardly a matter for serious immediate concern: the war eliminated competition from the industries of major competitors in overseas markets as at home; and at home this led to demands for substitutes where imports were no longer available. The demand for labour outstripped standard sources of supply, encouraging the recruitment of women and other relatively untapped reserves. Of course, there were also adverse factors, not least those of raw material supply; and many of these wartime benefits would not survive the war - they were the gains of protection and high government spending. But, though their direction may have led to adverse structural changes which boded ill for the future, the economic winds of war blew warm and strong.<sup>63</sup>

The post-war boom lasted through 1919 until, perhaps, the summer of 1920. It was based on a number of factors. The government, partly

62. Keir, 603.

63. This paragraph draws especially on C. Harvie, No Gods and Precious Few Heroes. Scotland 1914 - 1980 (London 1981), 10-15, and B. Lenman, An Economic History of Modern Scotland 1660 - 1976 (London 1977), 208-14.



because it could not instantaneously rid itself of responsibilities taken on during the war, partly as 'an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution',<sup>64</sup> maintained public expenditure at an unprecedentedly high peacetime level. Demand in certain staple industries - ship-building especially, and by extension steel, iron and coal - remained high into 1920, largely because the disruption caused by war created an apparent shipping shortage in 1919 much greater than the real shortfall in tonnage: when the disruption was overcome, shipbuilding and shipping rates collapsed.<sup>65</sup> It seems likely that the general extent of dislocation in markets, especially abroad, was not immediately appreciated, and that business expectation remained unjustifiably high for a short period;<sup>66</sup> it is also probable that British traders held a relative advantage in the short term, for the dislocation to the trade of Germany and some other competing nations was even greater. Edinburgh shared in this transient prosperity. Indices of industrial activity and individual prosperity rose: incomes, imports and exports were up, hours of work fell.<sup>67</sup> But the boom soon passed.

The overall causes of the slump have been much discussed; we need only explore certain aspects of the Edinburgh experience. A valuable insight into the dimensions of the slump in Edinburgh can be found in data about Leith's overseas trade (see table 3.9). Both imports and exports passing through the port reflected the post-war boom.

64. W.Astor, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, Hansard, 5, cxiv, col.1956, 8 April 1919, quoted by M.Swenarton, 'An "Insurance against Revolution": Ideological objectives of the Provision and Design of Public Housing in Britain after the First World War', Bull.Inst.Hist.Res. 54, 1981, 94. Swenarton's article clearly demonstrates the political imperatives which underlay the improvements in provision between 1919 and 1921; these advances were abandoned as the imperatives (essentially, fear of working-class unrest) subsided after 1920-21. The 'Out of Work Donation' (on which cp.ch.4 below) may also be seen in this light; see A.Deacon, In search of the Scrounger. The Administration of Unemployment Insurance in Britain 1920 - 1931 (Occasional Paper on Social Administration No. 60) (London 1976) 13-14; N.Whiteside, 'Welfare legislation and the unions during the First World War', Hist.J. 23, 1980, esp. 870-2.

65. Lenman, Economic History, 212.

66. Cp. A.L.Bowley, Some Economic Consequences of the Great War (London 1930), 94-6.

67. See below, and ch.4.

The pattern of imports shows a slump in 1921, when they fell by one-third, another fall the following year, and then a slow, faltering, 'recovery'.

Table 3.9

Overseas Trade of Leith  
(£millions at current prices)

	<u>Imports</u>	<u>Exports</u>
1911	15.1	7.1
1912	16.5	7.9
1913	15.7	6.9
..	..	..
1919	17.3	13.7
1920	30.1	14.7
1921	20.4	7.2
1922	16.7	6.7
1923	18.0	7.3
1924	20.0	6.7
1925	20.3	6.4
1926	20.0	4.5
1927	20.0	5.5

Source: M.W.Flinn, 'The Overseas Trade of Scottish Ports, 1900 — 1960', Scottish Journal of Political Economy 13, 1966, 232.

In large part this reflected the progress (paradoxically) of Scottish agriculture, for much of Leith's import trade was in foodstuffs, particularly grain and dairy produce calling for specialised handling facilities.<sup>68</sup> This produce was for consumption not only in Edinburgh, but in

an extensive domestic market in West and Mid Scotland, the North Eastern, Southern and Border Counties, and in North of England territory - all linked up by an indispensable railway system. <sup>69</sup>

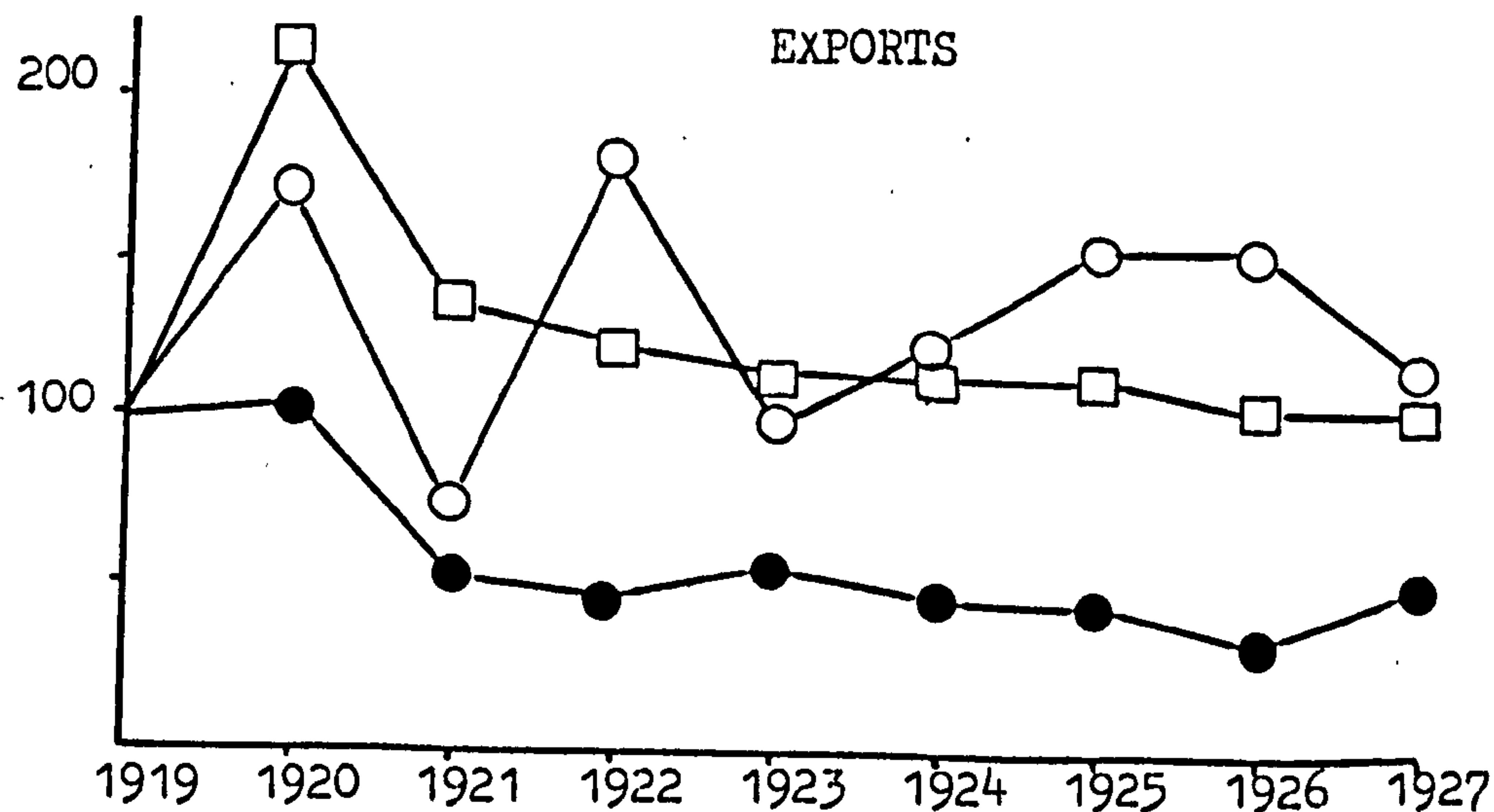
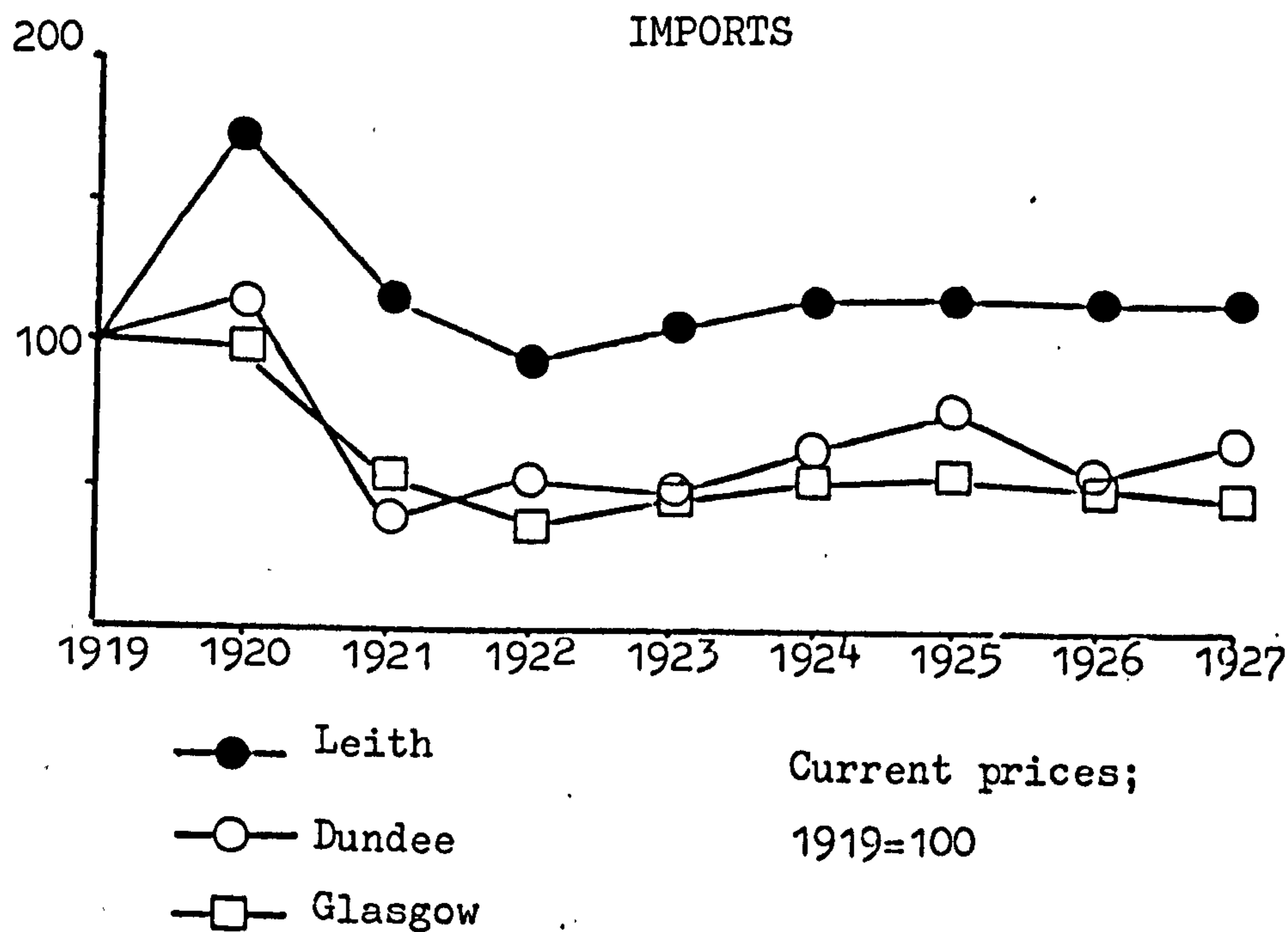
Certainly a comparison between the post-war importing records of three Scottish ports (see figure 3.10) indicates the stronger basis which foodstuffs gave to Leith's import trade - and this impression is strengthened by the relative stability, and high levels, of foodstuff

68. M.W.Flinn, 'The Overseas Trade of Scottish Ports, 1900 — 1960', Scot.J.Pol.Econ. 13, 1966, 226. On Scottish agriculture, cp . Lenman, Economic History, 213-14, 227-8.

69. Scottish Chamber of Commerce, 32.



Figure 3.10 Overseas trade of three Scottish ports, 1919-1927



Source: calculated from M.W.Flinn,  
 'The overseas trade of Scottish ports,  
 1900-1960', Scot.J.Political Economy 13,  
 1966, 231-2.

imports in comparison with the volatility, and often relatively low level, of raw material imports for industry.

In exports, the depression is more clearly marked. Leith had benefitted from the post-war boom (although in exports, as in imports, the impact of inflation should not be forgotten). But recession came sooner, and bit deeper. Again, the explanation lies partly in the structure of the port's exports. The overwhelming preponderance of these was coal, passing through not only from the Lothian field, but from throughout central Scotland.<sup>70</sup> Before the war, coal was exported in large quantities to Germany, Russia, and other Baltic destinations: this trade was lost in 1914 and, with the civil war in Russia (not to mention British hostility to the Bolshevik government), and the collapse of the German economy in 1923, the loss was not recovered. The entire Baltic trade, in which Leith had specialised, suffered similarly.<sup>71</sup> It may be that the superior exporting records of Glasgow and Dundee reflect a greater proportion of manufactured goods (cp figure 3.9), and in particular of engineering products.

The reductions in Government expenditure, spurred by the anti-waste campaign waged by the Beaverbrook and Northcliffe press against 'squandermania', affected the general level of purchasing power. The Out-of-Work Donation was phased out by 1921, and unemployment insurance was not an adequate substitute.<sup>72</sup> The 'Addison' housing programme was guillotined: a severe blow to the labour-intensive building industry.<sup>73</sup> After 1918, the naval base and dockyard at Rosyth, to which thousands of workers had been drawn during the war, was gradually run down: by 1922 all 'non-established' workers had been paid off, and most of the 'established' transferred to bases in England. This had a significant effect on Edinburgh's

70. Ibid.

71. Harvie, No Gods, 13-14, 25-6. Also cp Bowley, Economic Consequences 95-7; F. Douglas, Zero Hour for the Forth (Edinburgh, n.d. / c.1940/), 12, makes the case for the importance of British intervention in Russia in forceful terms.

72. See below, ch.4.

73. Swenarton, "'Insurance against Revolution'", 97-8.



economy, for many of its workers had commuted daily from the city on special trains.<sup>74</sup> But blows such as this only hint at the effect of the ending of war production, which had sustained demand in a wide variety of industries: many factory owners who may have carped at being required to make products outside their normal range under Ministry of Munitions direction during the war, began in these years to appreciate the advantages of assured markets.

The depression of 1921 deepened during 1922; thereafter recovery came only slowly and fitfully. We are hampered here by the absence of fully adequate indicators of the local position. We have already seen that recovery in Leith's overseas trade was, at best, faltering. The employment statistics are more ambiguous. Unemployment in Edinburgh (excluding Leith) fell through 1923 to a low point of 8 per cent in 1924, rising thereafter; in Leith it fell through 1923 and 1924, to a low point of 17 per cent in 1925, before rising again. (Unemployment is treated in greater detail in chapter 4.) Yet throughout these years the total number of those counted as 'effectively employed' was rising: the problem was that the working population (as measured by the total number insured) was at times rising faster (see table 3.11). And as the discussion in chapter 4 also shows, there is some evidence that, after a decline between 1921 and 1923, real wages (if not necessarily real incomes) edged upwards through the remainder of our period -

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Table 3.11      Working Population and Employment in Edinburgh

	<u>1923</u>	<u>1925</u>	<u>1927</u>
(a) Insured Persons	120,930	124,830	126,150
(b) Effectively employed	107,873	111,700	114,681
(c) Unemployed ((a)-(b))	13,057	13,130	11,469
(d) Unemployed (percentages)	10.8	10.5	9.1

Source:    N.Milnes, A Study of Industrial Edinburgh and the surrounding area 1923 - 34 (London 1936), 93-4, and calculations therefrom.

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though, conversely, this has probably more to do with falling prices than rising money wages. To summarise: although the evidence is not

74. Douglas, Zero Hour, 11.

unambiguous, the signs are that Edinburgh's economic experience in the earlier 1920s was, in direction if not in degree, that of the nation as a whole. The post-war boom lasted, at best, two years; the slump was at its worst through 1921 and 1922; thereafter, trade experienced a slow, faltering, upturn - 'recovery' is too strong a word.



## Chapter 4

### Standards of Living and the Working Class

#### 4.1 Introductory

The last chapter shewed that the environment of Edinburgh's labour politics during our period was shaped, in part, by long-term, historical factors: especially, the development of the city's social geography and industrial structure. But we also saw the economic turbulence of the wartime and post-war years. In this chapter we examine the impact of these short-term, economic, factors on the standard of living of the working class. We do so for two reasons. Firstly, as we shall see, the various elements of the standard of living affect the various elements of the working class in different ways: changes in living standards can, therefore, have important implications for the social structure of the working class (and hence for the latter's ability to act politically). Secondly, the physical, economic and social conditions of working class life, and changes in them, can be motives for political and trade union action. We concentrate on two aspects of the standard of living: we look, firstly, at a number of issues related to the labour market, employment and incomes, and we then discuss housing conditions.

#### 4.2 The cost of living

At its simplest, the standard of living may be regarded as a function of income and the cost of living. This formulation begs many questions (some of which we shall address in the course of our discussion), but it provides a framework for our investigation.

The cost of living is our starting-point. This, of course, 'varies according to the purchasing and consumption patterns of each household';<sup>1</sup> attempts to seek an objective or neutral criterion are thus almost inevitably frustrated. After 1914, an official 'cost of living' index was issued: this was designed to 'measure the percentage increase in the cost of maintaining a minimum or subsistence standard of living among working class households.'<sup>2</sup> Nationally collated, it did not register the detail of local variations. Certainly it was mistrusted within the labour movement: the Trades and Labour Council described it as 'obsolete and unreliable' in 1923. Interestingly, however, they did not question the basic assumption that the index should be based on a minimum expenditure level; they merely suggested that it should relate 'to those commodities which form the cost of subsistence of the workers';<sup>3</sup> and it was this dispute over detail, rather than principle, which underlay their decision to print annually a detailed 'Household Budget' after 1914. This was described as being the 'Minimum for Man and Wife and Two Young Children'.<sup>4</sup> (See table 4.1). Broadly, it supports the official version of changes in the cost of living. Unfortunately this 'unofficial', local research was not published after 1920, perhaps because it ceased to be helpful;<sup>5</sup> but, together with the official index, it confirms that the general wartime and immediate post-war experience of inflation was shared in Edinburgh, and suggests that the picture of falling prices shown by the official index was also shared after 1920.

1. R.Hyman and B.Price, 'Labour Statistics', in J. Irvine, I.Miles and J.Evans (eds.), Demystifying Social Statistics (London 1979), 266.
2. G.S.Bain, R.Bacon and J. Pimlott, 'The Labour Force' in A.H.Halsey (ed.) Trends in British Society since 1900 (London 1972), 107.
3. T&LC minutes, 31 July 1923.
4. TC AR 1916, 19.
5. Cp the comment by an employers' chairman in negotiations in 1922: 'There was no grumbling on your part about going on the Board of Trade cost of living when wages were going up, but now it is coming down people are taking exception to it although it is worked out in the same way'. ESAE&I and AEU, Conference Proceedings, 'Proposed reduction ... on piecework prices,' 20 July 1922, 5.



Table 4.1

Cost of living indices, 1914-1927

	<u>Official</u>	<u>TC 'restricted'</u>	<u>TC 'full'</u>
1914	100	100	100
1915	125	127	n.a.
1916	144	158	n.a.
1917	179	206	n.a.
1918	205	215*	n.a.
1919	221	208	192
1920	269	258	234
1921	199	[ Figures not available after 1920 ]	
1922	180		
1923	177		
1924	180		
1925	176		
1926	174		
1927	166		

Definitions: 'Official': Cost of Living index issued by (successively) Board of Trade and Ministry of Labour; 'TC restricted': household budget researched by Edin.TC, excluding rent, rates, lighting, boots and clothing, which are included in 'TC full'.

\* In 1918, several items were not available.

Sources: calculated from: A.H.Halsey (ed), Trends in British Society since 1900; Edin. TC and T&LC Annual Reports 1916-20.

If these figures graphically illustrate some of the pressures behind the post-war militancy, they give us no real grasp of the actual standard of living which might be enjoyed by Edinburgh's working class families. In pursuit of this, we may next look in more detail at the Trades Council's minimum household budget, the elements of which are set out in table 4.2. Several points stand out. It is not a generous allowance. As the compilers pointed out, it 'does not include any expenditure for Tobacco, Beer, Papers, Amusements, Holidays, Renewal of Furniture, etc.'<sup>6</sup>; nor does it cover work-related expenditure, such as fares. But it represents a working class view of an adequate, if minimal, weekly 'shopping basket'.

6. T&LC AR 1920, 6.

Table 4.2      Edinburgh Trades Council's Household Budget,  
with prices applicable on 19 June 1920

	<u>s. d.</u>		<u>s.d.</u>
$\frac{1}{4}$ stone meal	1 6	Vegetables	1 6
4 lbs. sugar	4 8	Currants & Raisins	7 $\frac{1}{2}$
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. tea	1 4	$\frac{1}{4}$ lb. corned beef	5
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. margarine	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	1 lb. fish	9
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. butter	1 6	Teabread	5 $\frac{1}{2}$
1 stone potatoes	2 8	6 2lb. loaves	3 3
1 jar marmalade	2 1 $\frac{1}{2}$	1 cwt. coal	2 7 $\frac{1}{2}$
1 lb. barley & peas	6	4 bunches firewood	5
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. lentils	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	Soap and Washing powders	1 7
Rice, tapioca, etc.	1 0	Sundries	2 10
1 $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. self-raising flour	8		
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. cheese	10	'Restricted' total	44s.6d.
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. bacon	1 3	Rent and rates	6 0
$\frac{1}{2}$ doz. eggs	1 9	Light	10
Milk	2 4	Boots and clothing	20 4
Butcher meat	7 0		
		'Full' total	71s.8d.

Definitions: 'Restricted' total was used in 1916-1918; 'Full' total in 1919 and 1920.

Source: T&LC Annual Report 1920, 6.

It is not easy to estimate which categories of families found themselves able, relatively easily, to match such a diet, or to exceed it, for there are a number of complicating factors. Where the budget assumes a family of two adults and two children to be typical, it is by no means clear that this was so. The censuses suggest that the mean number of children per family in Scotland at this period was in the region of four; and that the number was significantly greater in families where the husband was a manual worker.<sup>7</sup> Within the working class there was also variation, with the unskilled tending to have larger families than the skilled.<sup>8</sup> This

7. C.Rollett and J. Parker, 'Population and family' in Halsey, 55-7.

8. Ibid.



is supported by a survey carried out in Edinburgh in 1931: examining households where the 'chief occupations included:-

Asphalters, railwaymen, motor-drivers,  
Corporation employees, building trades  
operatives, labourers, shop assistants  
and porters, coopers, laundry workers,  
office-cleaners, carters, messengers,  
dockers, fishermen, miners, vanmen,  
apprentices of all descriptions, etc. etc., 9

this found 5.8 members of each family on average, with this mean varying in different streets between 4.3 and 8.2.<sup>10</sup> The reasoning behind the Trades Council budget is unfortunately not stated, so we can make no easy allowance for extra family members; but this does point to the narrowness of the line between adequacy and poverty - the same family income could lead to both.

#### 4.3 Employment incomes

Income was, of course, a second major factor in determining the standard of living, though again the evidence here is limited. Two main comments have been made on the movement of wages during our period: firstly, that money wage rates, having been broadly steady in the pre-war decade, rose sharply during the War to a peak in 1920, before falling again almost as sharply and steadying again from about 1922 at about twice the pre-war level.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, that there was a general narrowing of the differentials within the working class over the period 1914-1926:

9. I.T.Barclay and E.E.Perry, Behind Princes Street: A Contrast. Report on Survey of Housing Conditions of 443 Families situated in St. Andrew's Ward, Edinburgh (Edin. 1931), 33.

10. Ibid., 28-9.

11. Bain et al., in Halsey (ed.), 121.

more specifically, 'while the real wages of skilled workmen were little, if at all, greater in 1926 or in 1929 than before the War, those of unskilled men had increased greatly.'<sup>12</sup> Such trends would have had a profound effect not only on working class standards of living, but on how they were perceived. To a working class unused to such rapid inflation, the price rises of wartime may have thrown the legitimacy of the wage structure into question, for the effect of inflation on a relatively stable structure of money wages is to reduce real differentials. If it was not only differentials which were reduced, but also the real value of skilled workers' wages, a desire to see the restoration of differentials may have been associated with a new awareness of the problems of the lower-paid.<sup>13</sup> Although

12. Bowley , 148. Cp Bowley's table of 'Wages in less skilled occupations as Percentages of those in Skilled in each Industry at each Date' (ibid., 150):

	<u>Building</u>	<u>Mining</u>	<u>Engineering</u>	<u>Railways</u>
1913 Skilled	100	100	100	100
Semi-skilled	88	73	80	72
Unskilled	66	66	57	51
1926 Skilled	100	100	100	100
Semi-skilled	100	72	84	75
Unskilled	77	67	65	56

13. One indication of long-term change to this effect is the different attitude of the Trades Council to slum-dwellers. In the early 1880's its President, asked whether slum-dwellers resented their conditions, responded : 'Properly speaking it is generally the Irish element, labourers and what not who live in that locality, and I must confess I do not come into communication with them as a rule ...' (Quoted Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 98-9). Forty years later agitation on slum dwellers' conditions was a central aspect of the Council's activity: cp, e.g., EC of Edin. T&LC, Our Unseen City Revealed. A Tale of Housing Atrocities (Edin. n.d. / 1922 /); T&LC minutes, passim .



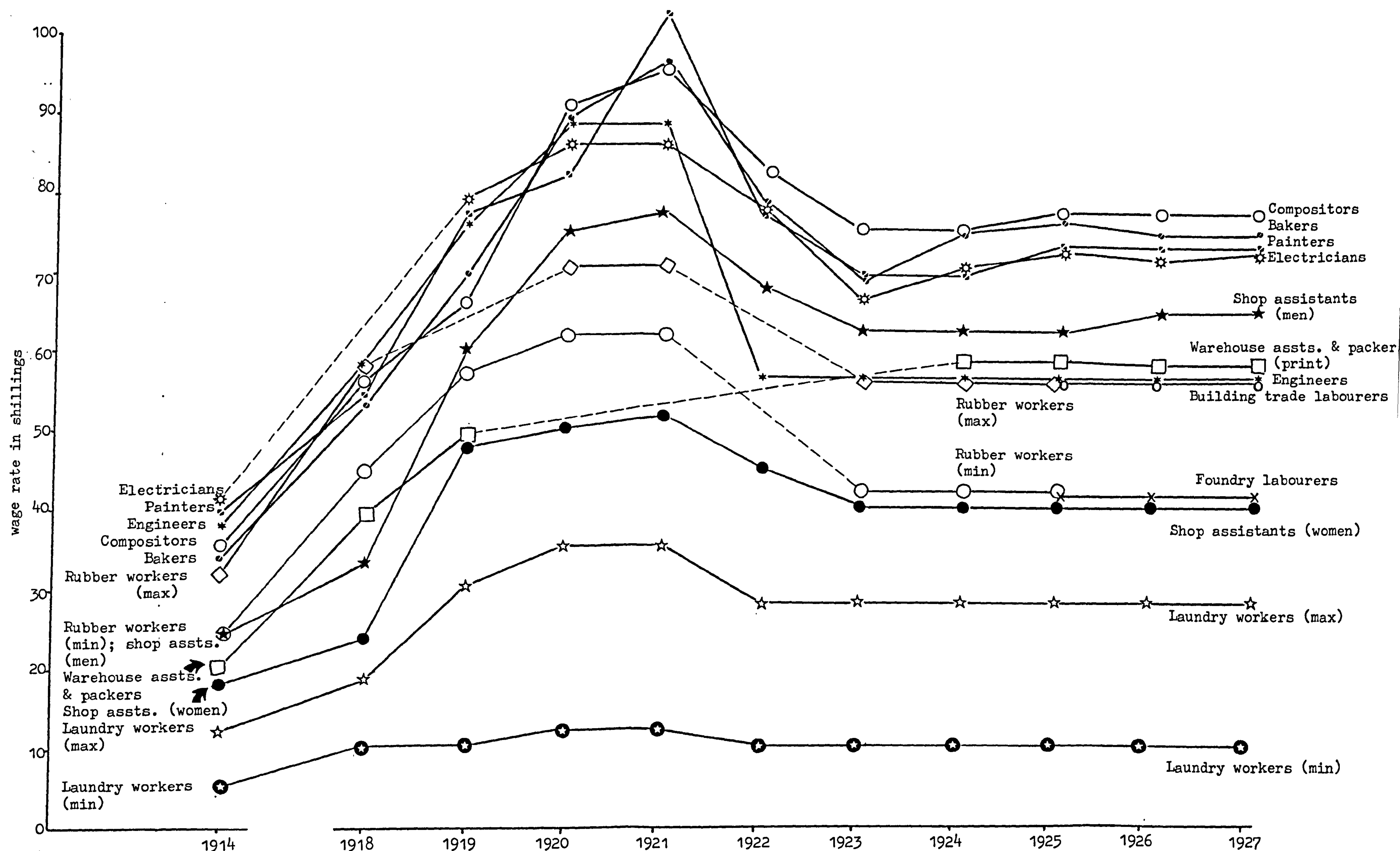
many cultural differences between working class groups would persist, those based on consumption patterns must have been threatened: for example, if the identity of the labour aristocracy was associated with perceptions of 'respectability', as Gray maintains,<sup>14</sup> it must have been both more difficult to preserve during wartime and, thereafter, more difficult to preserve as an exclusive and identifying attribute of the skilled worker.

Broadly, the national trends seem to have applied in Edinburgh, though we shall notice some differences of emphasis. We can also look in more detail at certain individual occupations. Throughout our period the Trades Council collected, and published annually, lists of wages and conditions applicable to various trades in the City, and these are valuable data, although we must use them with caution. The information was collected through a questionnaire circulated annually to affiliated union branches and asking inter alia for 'Wages, Including Bonuses.'<sup>15</sup> Apparently, many branches responded to this question only fitfully, if at all, and there are consequent gaps in the data. Nor are these gaps only random. Almost inevitably, it was easier for branch secretaries to complete the form where there was a single, uniform rate in the district, and this was a concept more applicable to skilled ('trades') unions, rather than to unions organising a multitude of grades and occupations. Perhaps the main exception to this was where the unskilled or semi-skilled formed an organisation with a recognised position in a union - either a chapel or a workplace branch; but this was rare. We therefore have quite full information on many trades (electricians, engineers, bookbinders, compositors, bricklayers, bakers and so forth), but the data relating to the semi-skilled and unskilled is patchy. This is, of course, especially true of the unorganised, or non-union, sectors of industry: a small indication of what may lie hidden is provided by the laundry workers, for whom unionisation was recent (and weak). The

14. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, esp. 136-43.

15. A fragment of such a form survives in a T&LC minute book (its reverse having apparently been used for scrappaper). It requests 'Information desired for the compiling of the Annual Report:-  
'in these matters: ' Union ... Branch ... Membership\* ... "Contracted-in Membership' ... Secretary ... Address ... Wages, including Bonuses ... Hours per week ... Overtime Rate... / here the page is torn off /.

Figure 4.3 Money wage rates in certain Edinburgh trades, 1914-1927



Source: T&amp;LC ARs, 1918-1928.



rise in money wages during the war years was a marked feature of the Edinburgh experience. 'In several trades ... wages have been doubled,' the Trades Council recorded in 1919, but 'in the trades and occupations which are not so well organised ... the workers have been unable to maintain a proper standard of life.'<sup>16</sup> Rates were highly volatile during 1919-1922, but thereafter became stable, in several cases remaining unaltered until 1927. Some of these wage movements are represented in figure 4.3; yet while this can give us some feeling of the extent of the wartime changes, and their impact, other methods of comparison are necessary to explore them to the full.

In table 4.4 we examine, as far as possible, the progress of pay differentials within industries: adequate data are available on only three. In Building, Bowley's designation of bricklayers and painters as skilled and semi-skilled respectively has been followed;<sup>17</sup> in printing the category 'warehouse assistants and packers' is taken to be an unskilled grade. The rubber industry is more difficult, since the data provide a range of payments. In some years these are distinguished as 'time' and 'piece', but it is not clear to which groups or grades different payments systems applied. However, taking them as examples of semi- and unskilled rates of pay, they are compared with two rates likely to have applied to craft maintenance workers in the industry. In general, we have a picture of narrowing wage differentials as between skill, and one broadly consistent with Bowley's national figures. The only exception to this pattern is in the relationship between electricians' and rubber workers' wages: and it is at least possible that this is specific to the electrical trades. In contrast, engineers lost ground in relation to process workers in this industry. We do, then, have evidence of an erosion of craft privilege, weakening the economic basis of cultural distinctiveness. This

16. TC AR 1919, 5; emphasis added.

17. Bowley, 149.

Table 4.4      Intra-industrial wage differentials in Edinburgh,  
1914 - 1926

<u>Building</u>	<u>1914</u>	<u>1919</u>	<u>1921</u>	<u>1925</u>	<u>1926</u>
Bricklayers	100		100		100
Painters	93		130		98
Labourers	59-73		n.a.		74
<u>Printing</u>					
Compositors	100	100			100
Warehouse assistants and packers	57	74			75
<u>Rubber manufacture</u>					
Engineer	100		100	100	
Rubber)( top: 84/95*			80	99	
worker)(bottom: 63			70	75	
Electrician	100		100	100	
Rubber)( top: 78/87*			82	77	
worker)(bottom: 58			72	58	

Note: \* different values for 1914 given in different TC Annual Reports. The higher figure is less probable.

Source: calculated from TCARs, various years.

is still more marked when we compare skilled and unskilled workers' pay between industries (figure 4.5): whereas in 1914 there was a marked differential between the wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers as a group, and the unskilled, this was no longer the case in the 1920s. Substantial differentials remained, but they were almost as much between different categories of skilledworkers and different unskilled occupations, as between skilled and unskilled. (The trades which suffered most were in engineering.)<sup>18</sup> By the mid-1920s, in short, wage rates seem to have been determined almost as much by the condition of the industry as by the worker's skill.

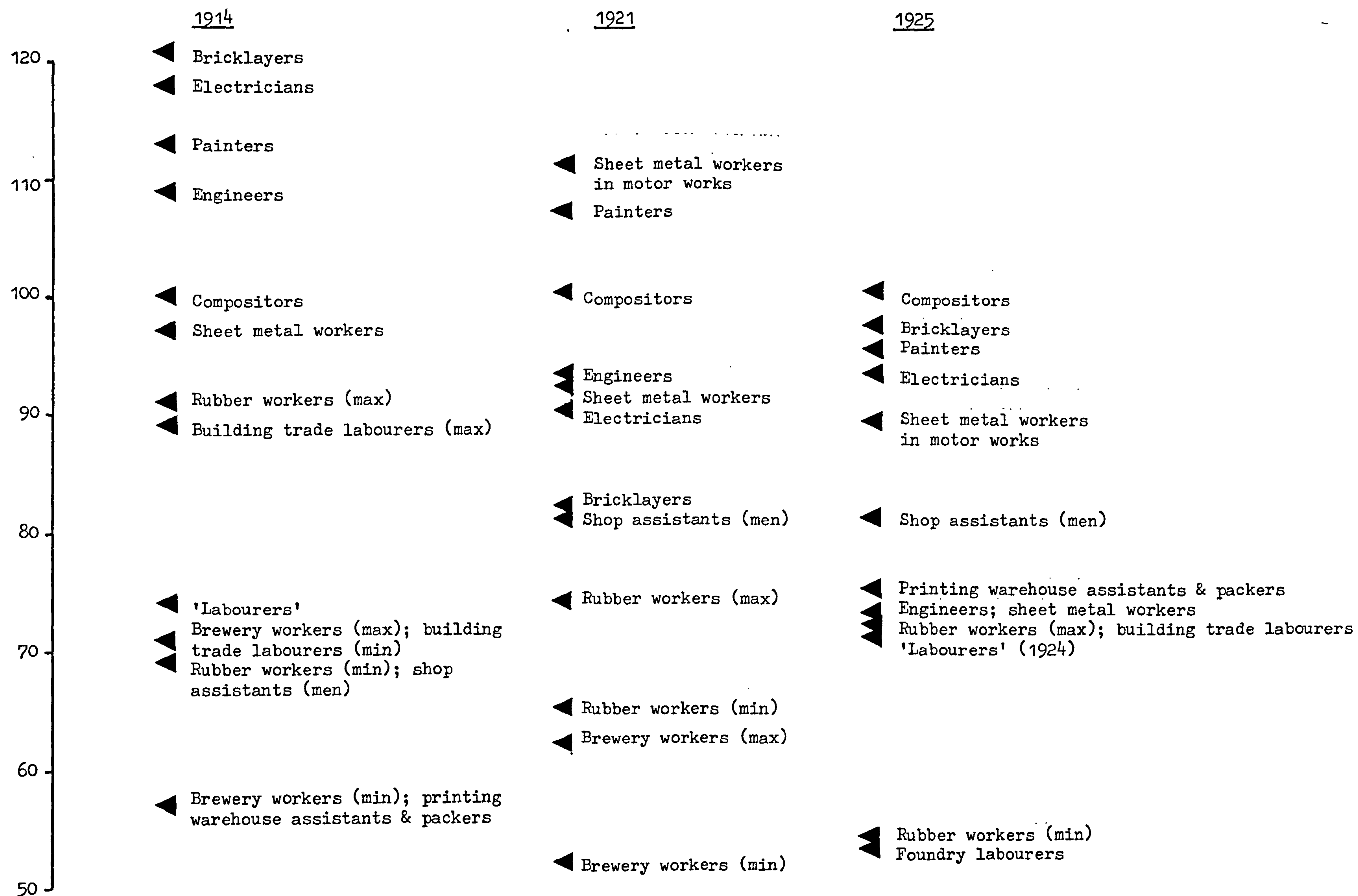
We now turn away from the impact of wage changes on working class fragmentation, to the changing real value of wages. Any estimate of real wages will inevitably be only approximate; however, an interesting method

18. Cp ss. 6.2 and 6.3 below.



Figure 4.5

Wage rates as a percentage of compositors' wage rates:  
selected trades, Edinburgh 1914, 1921, 1925.



Source: calculated from T&LC ARs 1918, 1921, 1925.

is to estimate the value of wages in relation to the Trades Council's own 'Minimum Household Budget'. (Unfortunately, lacking detail on this after 1920, it has been necessary to estimate its cost in each year using the 'official' cost of living index: the assumption, however, is that the approximation is not so great as to invalidate the results, which are shown in figure 4.6.) The trends are much as we might expect: falling real wage rates during wartime; significant increases in 1919-1921, somewhat eroded during 1922-1923, and then a small improvement. The strong suggestion is that almost all occupations had improved their real wages by 1927, as compared with 1914, and especially with 1918. Yet other trends also stand out. The real wages of the unskilled tended to improve faster than those of the skilled; the real wages of engineers fell.<sup>19</sup> But more than this, before and immediately after the War, the bulk of unskilled workers operated at below what the Trades Council considered a 'minimum' level; and immediately after the War, even skilled workers were perilously close to it. By the mid-twenties, however, most unskilled <sup>male</sup> workers seem to have earned more than this minimum,<sup>20</sup> if only marginally so.

Wage rates and incomes are not, of course, necessarily identical. Several factors must therefore be added to our discussion thus far. Firstly, not all wage rates were time rates. We have already seen that some rubber workers were paid piece rates, and we can reasonably presume that many piece rates were omitted from the Trades Council's compilations (since they were more difficult to estimate). Piecework

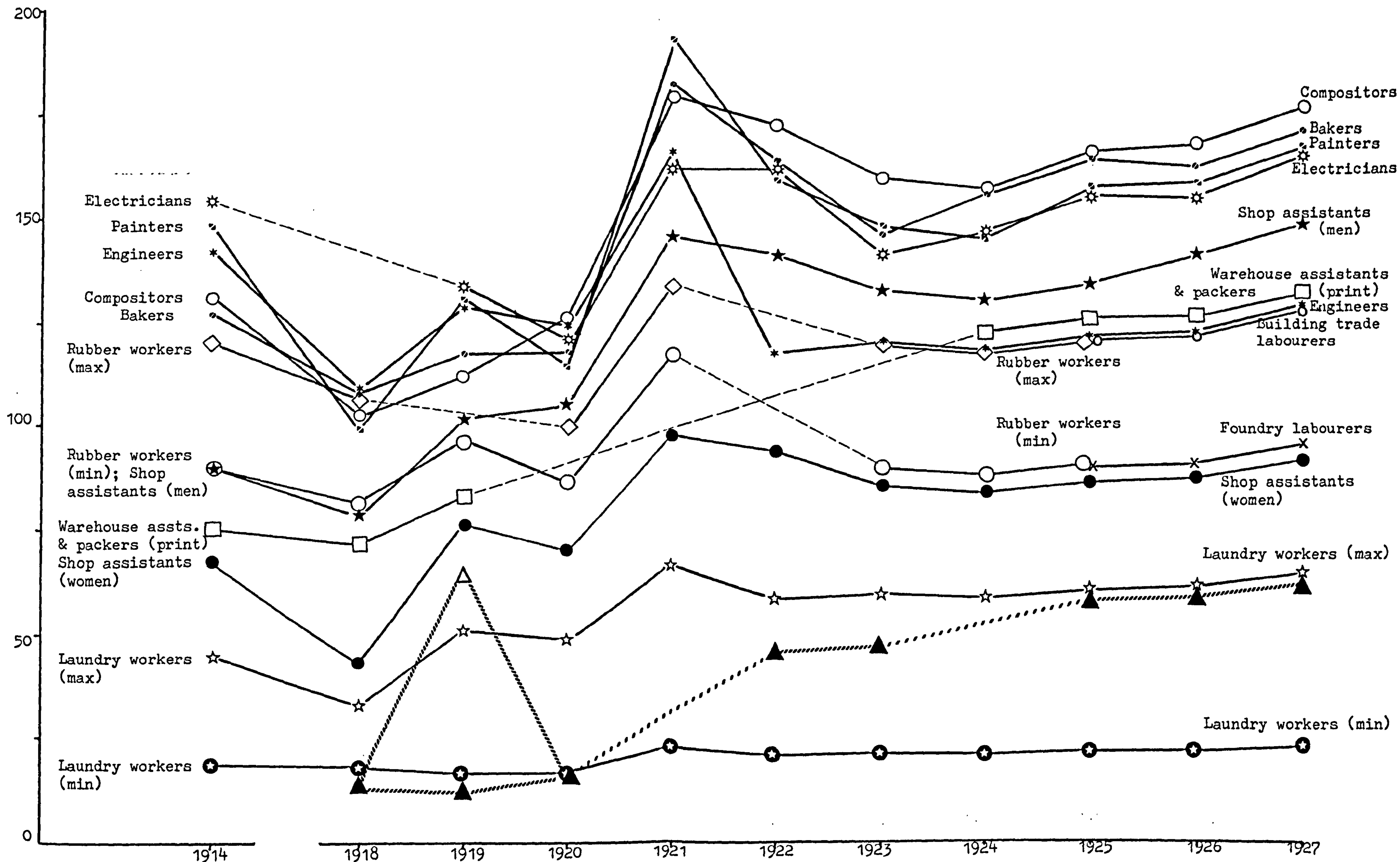
19. Cp comments by two AEU representatives in negotiations with the local engineering employers: 'Mr. STUART : ... [with] the starvation wages that you are offering ... I am quite serious in saying that some of our fellows are looking for anything bar engineering, ... What they are looking for are jobs either in pubs or at labouring work. 'Mr. WRIGHT : I might tell you for my own part that I was getting more some time ago for labouring.' ESAE&I and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings, in re outworking allowances, 22 January 1923, 20-21.

20. We can, of course, be less confident about absolute levels at any one time than about trends over time.



Figure 4.6 'Real' wage rates in Edinburgh, 1914-1927

Wage rates in certain Edinburgh trades, expressed as a percentage of the estimated cost of purchasing the Trades Council's 'minimum Household Budget' in each year:



▲ Unemployment insurance rate for man, wife, and two children under sixteen.  
 ▲ Out-of-Work Donation, 1919.

Note: base year 1920; cost of purchasing 'Minimum Household Budget' in other years estimated by using official 'cost of living' index.

Source: calculated from tables 4.1, 4.2, and figure 4.3.

seems to have been especially prevalent in two categories of work: where the finished product was essentially quite standardised and the production process relatively simple and labour-intensive (such as brushmaking); and where the production process, though highly capitalised, involved the production of large numbers of standardised items. In the latter case, it need not be the production of a single item: in rubber works, for example, the production of golf balls and hot-water bottles was seasonal;<sup>21</sup> in gas-meter manufacture, there were over 400 separately priced jobs for brass finishers.<sup>22</sup> And, of course, piecework was not necessarily a strategy to reduce earnings (although sometimes it was):<sup>23</sup> rather, it was designed to reduce unit costs by encouraging productivity. It therefore offered the 'clever craftsman' relatively high rewards, but rather less to the 'duffer'.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, earnings over a period of time depend upon regularity of employment. During the war the Trades Council pointed out that as there had 'been no rise in wages locally to equal half of the financial imposts on the necessities of life,

It is only the comparative regularity of employment now obtaining under the present abnormal conditions, and the overtime worked in some trades, that makes the increased cost bearable. 25

21. Milnes, 251.

22. ESAE&I and Brassfinishers' Society, Local Conference Proceedings, 'piecework prices - application for advance of 20 per cent', 29 October 1920, 15.

23. E.g., 'in one of the largest pits in East Lothian': 'The men thinking (foolishly of course) that if they put their backs into it and were able to earn an extra shilling or two - well, the ton rate being so small, the manager would surely never think of reducing it. But alas ... One fine day recently (or rather, one very black day for them) they were told that on and after a certain date the ton rate would be reduced [from 2s.] ... to 1s.6d.' (Andrew Clarke, Labour Standard, 25 April 1925)

24. ESAE&I and Brass finisher's Society, 29 October 1920, 13, 14: the terms were used by employers' representatives.

25. TC AR 1916, 6: the same point is made in TC AR 1917, 8.



The wartime experience was one of full employment and overtime; in these circumstances standards of living could rise even though real wage rates declined. During 1919 and 1920 the common demand was for a shorter working week combined with the abolition of overtime and high basic wages.<sup>26</sup> With the passing of the boom, however, overtime ceased to be a significant phenomenon: indeed, in contrast, short time working is more commonly the complaint.<sup>27</sup> We cannot, therefore, make any easy or straightforward deductions from the wage rate data concerning actual incomes; whilst those in full-time employment may have somewhat improved their position, work was in the 'twenties becoming increasingly uncertain and unpredictable.

In one sense, the extent of employment and under-employment was determined by what employers were wont to call 'the state of trade'. We examine overall trends in employment in the next section. But, in certain industries, this state of trade was highly dependent on seasonality. The effect of the season on certain outdoor trades is well known. In building, for instance 'In spite of all modern improvements ... the weather is still of paramount importance'.<sup>28</sup> Yet many other industries were influenced by seasonal changes in demand. The rubber industry experienced fluctuations which led to a 20 per cent variation in women's employment, always the most vulnerable.<sup>29</sup> Confectionery was also seasonal, as of course were most holiday-related trades. Although seasonality declined in some industries, such as printing,<sup>30</sup> and although it may have appeared insignificant beside the more secular trends in employment, it remains an important qualification standing against any over-easy assumptions about the working-class standard of living.

Short time working, and seasonal unemployment, were compounded in certain industries by casual labour. The dockers in Leith were, of course, casually employed. So too were building workers. 'No builder

26. See, E.g., NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 12 January 1919; NUR No 1 branch minutes, 2 February 1919.

27. E.g., *ibid.*, 11 March 1923, 27 July 1926; Labour Standard, 9 January 1926, ESAE&I and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Outworking Allowances', 19 December 1922, 15 -16.

28. Milnes, 158, see also A.D.Webb, 'The Building Trade' in S.Webb and A.Freeman (eds.), Seasonal Trades (London 1912), 312 - 93.

29. Milnes, 251-2: women made up roughly one half of the labour force.

30. J.Child, Industrial Relations in the British Printing Industry. The Quest for Security (London 1967), 234.

of a lower grade than foreman can count on continuous employment from one day to another. Technically he cannot count on it from one hour to another....<sup>31</sup> But casual employment of this, relatively formalised, type was only one variant: one point in a spectrum of managerial prerogative and tactics which included others such as the short-term employment of married women to overcome peaks in demand, and the use of apprentices as both cheap, and limited-term, labour.

#### 4.4 Unemployment

Unemployment, then, was important for the employed as well as the workless, for security of employment was central to security of income, and (especially during the 'twenties) unemployment was a widespread threat. For a variety of reasons the statistics must be treated with caution. 'It is still uncertain how far the volume and rate of inter-war unemployment are adequately reflected in the available statistics.'<sup>32</sup> This is particularly true of just our period. Yet we can describe its broad dimensions..

During 1919 and early 1920

unemployment was not perceived as a significant problem. It arose at only four meetings of the Trades Council. The following year it was discussed on 10 occasions. By 1921 it had become a major problem, arising at least 35 times - rather more than twice, on average, for each Trades Council meeting.<sup>33</sup> As the Council recorded in the middle of 1922,

31. Milnes, 158.

32. W.R.Garside, The Measurement of Unemployment. Methods and Sources in Great Britain 1850 - 1979 (Oxford 1980), 46; *ibid.* 29-61. for a discussion of the problems.

33. TC and T&LC minutes, 1919-1921.



On the average, during the year  
 [1921-22] approximately 15,000  
 of our people have been on the live  
 Registers of the Labour Exchange alone.  
 Those people, with their dependants  
 constituting about a fifth of the  
 population .... 34

The progress of unemployment during the remainder of our period is  
 shewn in table 4.7:

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	<u>Population of</u> <u>Working age</u>	<u>Unemployment in Edinburgh</u>			
		<u>Insured</u> <u>Persons</u>	<u>Effectively</u> <u>Employed</u>	<u>Unemployed</u> <u>No.</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1923	291,309	120,930	107,873	13,057	10.8
1925	294,964	124,830	111,700	13,130	10.5
1927	298,618	126,150	114,681	11,469	9.1

S o u r c e: N.Milnes, Industrial Edinburgh, 93-4.

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Whilst the relationship of insurance figures to the 'actual' rate of unemployment is unclear, in terms of simple volume they can only have understated the problem, for various groups were excluded, whilst a substantial section of the gainfully employed was not insured.<sup>35</sup> We can therefore speak of the numbers unemployed in table 4.7 as conservative approximations.

There is reason to believe, too, that these figures substantially understate the incidence of unemployment on the working class, and particularly on working class areas of the city. Some impression of this can be gained by comparing unemployment in Edinburgh 'proper' with that in the more working class district of Leith. The proportions of the insured population unemployed are shown in figure 4.8, and are in each year nearly twice as great in Leith as in Edinburgh. It

34. T&LC AR 1922, 7: on the relationship between the 'Live Register' and other unemployment statistics, see Garside, 40 - 45.

35. 'At the 1931 Census nearly 19½ million persons within the insurance age limits were counted as gainfully employed, of whom only 12½ were insured against unemployment.' Garside, 32.

Figure 4.8    Unemployment in Edinburgh and Leith  
1923-1927

Annual percentage unemployed among insured populations



Source: Milnes, Industrial Edinburgh, 85.



was Leith's industrial structure which led to this: 'the high unemployment percentage [in Leith] is not alone due to a slump in shipping and transport, but rather to an all-round decline which has affected all industries.'<sup>36</sup> In reality, therefore, the incidence of unemployment among the working class in Edinburgh as a whole may have been rather higher than the statistics suggest; perhaps as high as the Leith rate.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately the evidence available on the duration of unemployment, where it exists at all, is sparse and unreliable.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore impossible to do more than make very rough estimates about what proportion of the city's workers experienced unemployment during our period. Extrapolating, perhaps too simplistically, from a national survey to the local situation, Milnes estimated that between 1923 and 1930, 65.8 per cent of the City's insured population experienced 'intermittent unemployment', and of these over 60 per cent 'would have known but short spells.'<sup>39</sup> By the same token, of course, nearly 40 per cent would have known longer spells; and these calculations suggest that some experience of unemployment was the rule, rather than the exception, during these years - although the incidence of unemployment in 1923-1927 would clearly not have been so good.

Unemployment, therefore, was sufficiently common to be widely feared. It also tended to create a structural fragmentation within the working class, for the financial gap between the employed and the unemployed could be considerable. (We leave aside, here, those whose unemployment was short term and relatively predictable.) Especially was the gap large between the unemployed and the employed trade unionist,

36. Milnes, 84.

37. Cp Labour Standard, 13 February 1926 (report on TC and unemployed committees' deputation to Edin. Town Council): regarding 'an idle list of 20,000 people', 'Mr. Hew Robertson ... contended that the position was worse than appeared, because the industrial section of the community, from whom this 20,000 was drawn was comparatively small.'

38. Garside, 39, 183-4.

39. Milnes, 64; on which her calculations are based, see Garside, 184, n.7.

for the compression of inequalities between trade unionists itself emphasised their distance from the workless. Of course, this is to oversimplify: there remained a substantial sector of ill-paid labour, much of it female, of which the laundry workers are indicative.<sup>40</sup> But this sector was very largely ununionised - or, perhaps more precisely in many instances, de-unionised; for, as the depression bit deeper, the frontiers of unionisation were rolled back from the positions they had secured in 1920-1921.

Without question, the workless were poor; the long-term unemployed could be very poor indeed. The editor of the Labour Standard recalled meeting a man in the winter of 1923-1924,

in the Waverley Station who had been unemployed for 18 months, had lost his wife, was then in his third week of the 'gap', had had two meals in three days, had wrists that were mere skin and bone.

Apparently, he also carried some poison 'for the simple purpose of killing himself and ending his torture.'<sup>41</sup> Suicide was no doubt exceptional, but the income available to the unemployed was very limited. It came from two main sources: unemployment insurance benefit, and parish relief under the Poor Law. Both were highly circumscribed by regulations designed to protect the various funds against 'abuse' by 'scroungers', and these regulations could be onerous. This is not the place to examine these in detail, but it is necessary to look briefly at the impact of both in Edinburgh.

Unemployment insurance regulations were constantly changing during the early 'twenties. The benefit rates, shown in table 4.9, show one aspect of this. They became more generous, although even so their real value should not be exaggerated. In addition, two qualifications should be made. Firstly, government fears at the end of the war led to the introduction of an 'Out-of-Work Donation' in November 1918:

40. Milnes, esp. 257-9.

41. Labour Standard, 20 June 1925; the 'gap' was a period of five weeks during which no uncovenanted benefit could be claimed (see W. Hannington, A Short History of the Unemployed (London 1938), 28, 35, 39).



Table 4.9

Unemployment Benefit Scales 1918-26

<u>Scale effective from:</u>	<u>Adults</u>		<u>16 - 18</u>		<u>Dependents</u>	
	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>	<u>Wife</u>	<u>Each Child</u>
1911	7s	7s	3s6d	3s6d	-	-
1919(Dec)	11s	11s	5s6d	5s6d	-	-
1920(Nov)	15s	12s	7s6d	6s	-	-
1921(Mar)	20s	16s	10s	8s	-	-
1921(July)	15s	12s	10s	8s	-	-
1921(Nov)	15s	12s	10s	8s	5s	1s
1924(Aug)	18s	15s	7s6d	6s	5s	2s

Sources: W. Hannington, A Short History of the Unemployed (1938), 21,22,28,29,30,39; J.J.Astor et al., Unemployment Insurance in Great Britain (1925), 12.

29s for men, 24s. for women, 6s. for the first dependent child and 3s. for each additional child.<sup>42</sup> This lasted until November 1919 for civilians, but until March 1921 for ex-service men and women. The early figures therefore understate the average income of the unemployed. Secondly, as the scales themselves became more generous, so conversely the administrative rules through which they were applied to individuals became more severe.<sup>43</sup> There were several reasons for this, including the protection of the Insurance Fund itself. But most important seems to have been the creation of a climate of opinion in the press, national but also local, which assumed abuse of the system to be normal. As The Manchester Guardian noted,

42. A.Deacon, In Search of the Scrounger, 13. The Rates were raised from 20s. and 24s. four days before the General Election; Hannington, 20, uses the wrong figures. In his Unemployed Struggles 1919 - 1936 (London 1936), 28, Hannington attributes the origins of the NUWCM in large measure to the ending of the Out of Work Donation.

43. Deacon is a detailed study of these; see also J. Harris, 'In Search of the Scrounger', BSSLH 35, 1977, 64-7; Deacon, 'Labour and the unemployed: the administration of insurance in the twenties', BSSLH 31, 1975, 10-11.

Judging by the correspondence columns of some newspapers, two propositions are very firmly held by some middle-class tax payers - first, that the unemployed would rather draw the dole than go to work, and, second, that the one ideal of the poorer classes is to get something for nothing out of the pockets of the richer. <sup>44</sup>

This approach certainly underlies the questions asked by one well-known, independent, study:<sup>45</sup> and produced wry comments in the labour press. One Evening News leader, for instance, drew a tortuous moral from the fact that a

poor householder must now spend £30 a year in having his garden weeded by casual labour, whereas he could get the work done for £12 before the War. 'The broad lesson', says the News, 'is that there is now the dole to fall back upon'.

'Why do these people do it?' asked the Labour Standard. Was it 'in the British tradition to kick a man when he is down?' Did they 'ever inflict their sermons on the idle rich ...?' Or was it 'merely that the existence of the dole raises the cost of the retainers which they require to keep them in a life of ease?'<sup>46</sup>

Yet such protests were vain: the consequence was continual bouts of 'tightening up', especially in relation to whether the applicant for benefit was 'genuinely seeking work'. In part these proceeded from governmental directives, but local administration was also important. Let us recount one example. Legislation in 1925 decreed that benefit should be paid for periods for which contributions had not been paid

44. Manchester Guardian 7 January 1926.

45. J.J.Astor et al., Unemployment Insurance in Great Britain: a critical examination (London 1925).

46. Labour Standard, 21 March 1925, referring to Evening News, 16 March 1925, On the administration of the Poor Law in Scotland, see I.Levitt, 'The Scottish Poor Law and Unemployment, 1890 - 1929' in T.C.Smout (ed.) The Search for Wealth and Stability (London. 1979), 263 - 82.



'only if ... [the Minister of Labour] deems it is expedient in the public interest to pay such benefit to the particular applicant concerned'.<sup>47</sup> This was especially relevant to so-called 'extended benefit'. Decisions were to be made by Rota Panel Committees, consisting of three members, including employers' and workers' representatives. According to Unemployment Insurance in Great Britain:

Since these conditions involve the determination of what is 'reasonable', as distinct from questions of technique, the democratic Rota Panel is a more appropriate adjudicating body than the employment exchange officials. 48

This view was not shared in the Edinburgh Employment Exchange, for whereas 'Prior to the new regulations ... the applicant only appeared before the Rota Committee, and, if satisfactory, a grant was recommended',

With the tightening-up process now in force, many applicants have been called before the permanent officials of the Divisional Office. Following this interview they were again called before a Rota Committee, with those gentleman's written observations.

'The results', according to the Labour Standard were 'best known to many who are now getting Parish Relief.'<sup>49</sup> The District Secretary of the AEU claimed that officials had interviewed claimants for extended benefit even 'in certain cases where grants had been recommended by Rota Committees'; no Rota Representatives were present, and 'claimants were "tricked" into making statements likely to injure their claims'. It seems that this led to the reversal of decisions in 47 cases out of 75.<sup>50</sup> Certainly the variation in the numbers of those receiving Parish Relief is suggestive of changes in policy, rather than simply in the number unemployed (see table 4.10). In short, the Insurance benefit scales were not applicable to all the unemployed. Those

47. Astor et al., 12; cp Hannington, Short History, 43.

48. Astor et al., 13-14.

49. Labour Standard, 21 November 1925.

50. Ibid., 19 December 1925; the AEU District Secretary was also Secretary of the Advisory Committee of Workpeoples' Representatives, for Edinburgh and Leith.

Table 4.10      Numbers in receipt of Public Assistance in Edinburgh,  
1923-1928

	<u>Number on roll at 15 May</u>	
	<u>Able-bodied</u>	<u>Disabled</u>
	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Poor</u>
1923	4095	3064
1924	3135	3470
1925	2284	3602
1926	3626	3549
1927	3446	3550
1928	3810	3664

Source:      Milnes, 27.

who had been unemployed too long, or had paid too few contributions, or were unfit/or 'not genuinely seeking' work (or, it seems, who had been insufficiently quick-witted in interviews with Ministry officials) were thrown onto the Parish. Parish Relief was very largely determined locally - by the Parish Council. The outlook of this body was summed up in a speech by its chairman, one Colonel Young, to its Annual Dinner in 1925:

It was not the duty nor in the power of any community to find work for anybody.... The poor they would always have with them, but that should not be taken as any encouragement for those who feared nothing so much as their success in getting a job.    51

In consequence, the Parish Council operated both a means test and an attitude test: the fate of those who failed these is described by a Labour Parish councillor:

Recently a number of unemployed workers drawing Parish Relief for themselves and their families, called on me stating that the Assistant Inspector had told them that as they were not genuinely seeking work their Parish Relief had ceased. They would have to go into the Poorhouse and the Parish would look after the wife and family while they were there.    52

51. , Quoted in Evening News, 10 March 1925; Labour Standard, 21 March 1925.

52. W.Waterston in Labour Standard, 11 December 1926.



Table 4.11

Parish Relief scale in Edinburgh

<u>Adult</u>	<u>Adult living at home</u>	<u>Man and Wife</u>	<u>per child</u>	<u>Maximum</u>
15s.	7s. 6d.	22s. 6d	3s. 6d	40s.

Source: Labour Standard 7 August 1926.

For those who were successful, however, the Relief scale was that shown in table 4.11: this was less generous than the so-called 'Mond Scale' suggested by the then Minister of Health in 1922, but was in national terms not unfavourable.<sup>53</sup> Importantly, for even an averagely-sized family, it was more generous than unemployment insurance.

In view of these vagaries of unemployment insurance and parish relief, it is only possible to get the broadest impression of the effect of unemployment on real income, and on income relationships. The calculations in table 4.12 must, therefore, be treated with a certain scepticism: the sense in which they were 'available' is a limited one.

Table 4.12

'Real' value of relief available in Edinburgh, 1918-27,  
as a percentage of estimated cost of purchasing Trades  
Council's 'Minimum Household Budget' in each year

	<u>Unemployment Insurance</u>	<u>Out-of-Work Donation</u>	<u>Parish Relief</u>
1918	12.8		
1919(Jan/Dec)	11.8	64.4 (2)	
1920 (Dec 1919- Nov 1920)	15.3	- (2)	
1921	(1)	-	
1922	45.6	-	
1923	46.5	-	
1924	(1)	-	
1925	57.6	-	
1926	58.2	-	63.5
1927	61.1	-	

Notes: (1) : changes in the rates during these years, together with the rapid change in prices in 1920, make estimation of the 'real' value impossible. (2) : Civilian Out-of-Work Donation ceased 24 November 1919; ex-servicemen's on 31 March 1920. All figures are for family of man, wife, and 2 children under 16.

Sources: calculated from: tables 4.9, 4.11, and A.Deacon, In Search of the Scrounger (1976), 13.

53. Labour Standard, 7 August 1926; Astor et al., 34.

They do suggest, however, that for those able to obtain Unemployment Insurance benefit, conditions were best in 1919, and then improved again from 1921 onward. Comparisons with the wage rates of those in employment are still more difficult. It was a common middle-class opinion that the dole discouraged the unemployed from taking casual or lower-paid labour.<sup>54</sup> For those with families there may be some truth in this, though the 'policing' of the various systems was a powerful disincentive. Table 4.13 compares wage and unemployment insurance rates on the same basis as figure 4.5 although unfortunately it is necessary to take different years. The implication is that whilst union-organised employment retained differentials in relation to the unemployed, there was indeed a sector of semi-organised, semi-casual, unskilled employment where there was little financial incentive to work - unless, of course, two or more members of a family could find employment.

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Table 4.13      Wage and Unemployment Insurance Rates 1920 - 1926.

	<u>1920</u>	<u>1923</u>	<u>1926</u>
Compositors	100	100	100
Engineers	98	74	73
Labourers *	n.a.	73	72
Laundry Workers (Top of scale)	37	37	36
- " - (Foot of scale)	13	13	13
Unemployed single man	12	20	23
- " - - " - woman	12	16	19
- " - couple	12	26	30
- " - couple with two young children	12	29	35
- " - boy, 17 years	6	13	10
- " - girl, 17 years	6	11	8

\*: Labourers: "Labourers" 1923; Building Trade Labourers 1926.

Sources: calculated from table 4.9 Trades Council Annual Reports each year.

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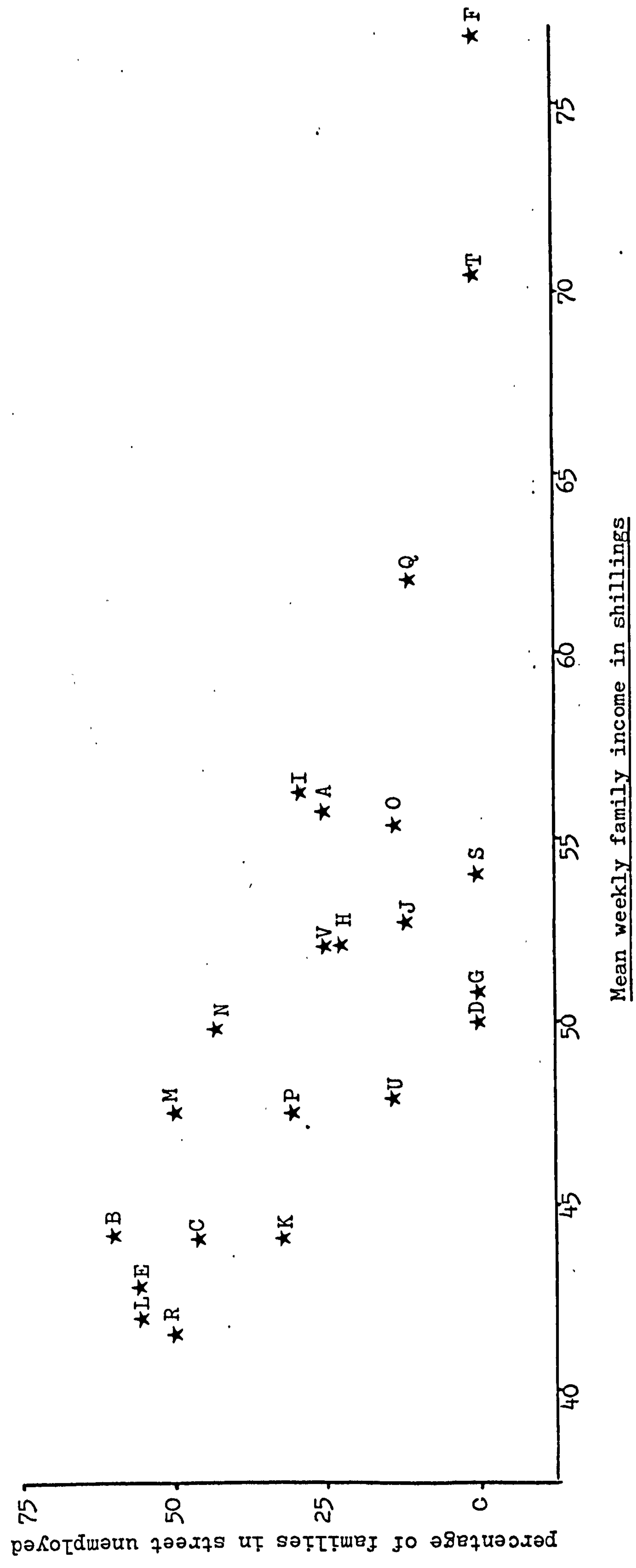
But unemployment did make people poorer, a fact which the existence of ill-paid jobs cannot gainsay. A 1930 study of St. Andrew's Ward, in the 'New Town', provides clear evidence of this.<sup>55</sup> Essentially

54. Ibid., 61-2.

55. Barclay and Perry.



Figure 4.14: Relationship between Family Income and Unemployment in certain streets in St. Andrew's ward, Edinburgh, c.1930



(For key to streets, see following page.)

Notes to figure 4.14:

	<u>Name of street</u>	<u>Number of families visited:</u>
A	India Place	88
B	Church Street	5
C	Church Place	17
D	Church Lane	1
E	Saunders Street	9
F	St. Bernard's Place	10
G	Darlings Buildings	5
H	South St. James Street	40
I	North St. James Street	14
J	East St. James Street	8
K	St. James Square	19
L	St. James Place	23
M	Elder Street	4
N	Clyde Street	7
O	Broughton Street	30
P	Leith Street and Terrace	45
Q	Little King Street	9
R	Albany Street	2
S	Duke Street	2
T	York Place	4
U	Rose Street	49
V	Thistle Street	16

Source: calculated from I.T.Barclay and E.E.Perry,  
Behind Princes Street. A Contrast (Edinburgh 1931), 32.



a survey of housing conditions - the area was selected for study because of its high infant mortality rate - it included a survey of the weekly earnings of 407 families in 22 streets. By comparing, for each street, the mean family income with the number of families unemployed, we have what is probably the most helpful overall indication of the impact of unemployment on the working class. Again, there are problems: we cannot treat the area as 'representative': indeed, it was chosen because it was not, although in fact it was broadly comparable, in terms of infantile mortality, with four or five other wards. By 1930, also, unemployment had been a fact of life for ten years. But, as figure 4.14 shows, there does seem to have been a clear relationship between unemployment and family income, and it is reasonable to suppose that a not dissimilar relationship existed five years earlier, in type if not in intensity.

#### 4.5 Women's employment

The war had, of course, resulted in a rise in the employment of women; this was largely eroded between 1919 and 1921 by a combination of men returning from the war, and family formation.<sup>56</sup> But unemployment and short-time working thereafter meant that married women increasingly began to seek work in order to supplement family incomes; the recession also seems to have led to a decline in the marriage rate after 1920,<sup>57</sup> as the economic basis of family formation was eroded. Since working after marriage was unusual (though becoming less infrequent) for women, a reduction in the marriage rate tended to increase the supply of female labour. It is therefore likely that the increase in the number of women in insured employment in the city (see table 4.15), which was rather greater than the rise in male employment, nevertheless understates the increase in the number of women seeking work: certainly Milnes believed that 'more women obtain work largely because many more seek it.'<sup>58</sup>

56. Bowley, 57-61; see also table 4.18 below.

57. Milnes, 70 - 71.

58. Ibid., 74.

Table 4.15

Male and Female Employment 1923-1927

<u>Year</u>	<u>Insured men:</u>		<u>Insured women:</u>	
	<u>No.</u>	<u>as Percentage</u> <u>of pop<sup>n</sup> of working age</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>as Percentage</u> <u>of pop<sup>n</sup> of working age</u>
1923	82,360	63.2	38,570	23.9
1925	84,880	64.3	39,950	24.5
1927	85,470	63.9	40,630	24.6

Note: population of working age is estimated by taking an arithmetic increase each year between 1921 and 1931 censuses.

Source: N.Milnes, Industrial Edinburgh, 94-5.

So in one respect the rise in women's employment was a corollary of unemployment: a response to family poverty, it indicates a falling average standard of living. But as women became cheaper to employ (compared to men), employers seem to have exploited the opportunity.<sup>59</sup> Straightforward displacement of men by women seems to have been unusual; more often, it occurred in conjunction with changes in technology or product. It was said, for instance, that the replacement of men by women in the rubber industry was

not due to any actual displacement of men by women, but rather to the development of certain branches of the work which are particularly suited to the women workers. 60

In many cases, women's relative advantage seems to have been associated with non-wage elements of costs. In the laundries, married women were not generally employed, for their enforced retiral on marriage 'gives those who remain a greater chance of promotion', whilst also providing, in married, former employees, a pool of trained, casual labour for use in 'holiday or rush periods.'<sup>61</sup> Elsewhere, women were less well organised by trades unions: on the railways, for instance, 'women carriage cleaners ... were not coming up to the "scratch"' in 1920, and meetings were held by the NUR to induce 'better organisation' among them.<sup>62</sup>

59. Ibid., 190-91, 256-7.

60. Ibid., 245; these branches apparently included the making of shoes, golf balls, and hot water bottles.

61. Ibid., 257.

62 NUR No.1 branch minutes, 1 February 1920; cp 15 February 1920.



As such, their employment was both cheaper and less well protected.

Before turning to the final section of this chapter, let us draw together the various threads of our discussion. The inflation of 1914-1920 was unprecedented in living memory. Real wages fell during the war, though with full employment and overtime, earnings did not suffer comparably. The effect of the inflation, and the post-war wage advances, was to compress wage differentials. When the post-war boom passed, therefore, two distinct developments had occurred: among employed trade unionists, skill differentials had been eroded, or even eliminated; but there was a substantial gap between the employed trade unionist and the unemployed (especially the long-term unemployed). At the same time, the existence of the unemployed encouraged new people to seek work in order to sustain family incomes; this depressed wages, especially among non-unionised sectors of employment. We thus see an evolving structure of intra-class fragmentation, in which the fact of a worker's having a job, and the sector in which that job was, were increasing in importance compared with his or her skill.

#### 4.6 Working class housing

This section is concerned with the relationship between the working class's standard of living and its housing, and with the relationship between its housing and its class structure. We shall discover that, for various reasons, housing diminished in importance during our period as a mechanism for sustaining intra-class fragmentation. We begin by briefly surveying the development of housing patterns in Edinburgh; we then examine how the housing market changed over our period, and its relationship to incomes; and finally we discuss the distribution and social meaning of working class housing patterns.

Later nineteenth century Edinburgh saw two complementary processes of social segregation. Firstly, much of the middle class migrated to new suburbs, leaving its former houses to the working class. Until the 1920s, however, the migration was short range, the new suburbs were not far from the older areas, and much of the town centre (especially the 'New Town') remained prosperous. So Robert Louis Stevenson's observation that

Social inequality is nowhere more ostentatious than at Edinburgh [for] ... to the stroller along Princes Street, the High Street callously exhibits its back garrets. 63

remained true well into the inter-war period: the physical distance between the classes was very small.

Second, within the working class a similar process took place. The 'more prosperous' workers were able to move to 'new and superior housing'.<sup>64</sup> In general, however, this did not lead to the creation of geographically distinct areas of owner-occupied working class housing: on the contrary,

most manual workers of all occupational groups continued to live in rented flats of the tenement style. 65

Lacking the ability to emphasise the differentiation within the working class by geographical isolation, nineteenth century Edinburgh was marked by 'well-understood gradations in types of working-class housing'.<sup>66</sup> The standard and status of accommodation could vary 'from district to district, street to street, even block to block or stair to stair', so that ' "improved" blocks might be found interspersed among dwellings of a distinctly poorer class'.<sup>67</sup> So even within socially mixed working class streets, the 'respectable' stood apart from the 'rough'.

This segregation seems to have diminished, at least in intensity, from the late nineteenth century onwards. In two working-class streets studied by Elliott and McCrone, built in the 1880s and originally occupied

63. R.L.Stevenson, Picturesque Notes on Edinburgh (London n.d.[1879?]) 18

64. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 95.

65. Ibid., 96.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.



largely by skilled manual and white collar workers, the proportion of these shrank and that of unskilled workers grew.<sup>68</sup> But this form of intra-class fragmentation was most severely eroded during the war, Housing standards were intimately linked with rents, and therefore with incomes: we have seen something of the effect of the War on the latter. However, not only did the war (and its immediate aftermath) flatten inequalities in income, and increase real income: it did so especially in relation to housing costs.

In 1915, under pressure from the Clydeside rent strike, Asquith's government introduced a freeze on rents: the precise effect of this may be unclear, but overall it appears to have had the desired effect. The Trades Council in Edinburgh for instance, judged that average working class rents had not changed in the City in 1920 compared with 1914,<sup>69</sup> and certainly after the 1915 Act there were no major complaints by the Trades Council about breaches of this law. Within the working class budget, therefore, the cost of housing plummeted relative to other expenditures: in terms of the Trades Council's 'Household Budget', its 'Minimum Standard', this is shown in table 4.16:

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Table 4.16      Rent as a proportion of Trades Council's Minimum Household Budget, 1914-1920

29 July 1914	19.7 per cent
28 June 1919	10.2 per cent
19 June 1920	8.4 per cent

Note:      this was, of course, their view of a minimum rent.

Source:    calculated from Trades Council annual reports 1919, 10, and 1920, 6.

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Although rents were increased during the 'twenties, they remained controlled,<sup>70</sup> and at the end of the decade, according to Bowley, 'form[ed] a much smaller proportion of working-class incomes than did pre-war rents of the pre-war incomes.'<sup>71</sup> In

68. Elliott and McCrone, 29 - 30.

69. TC AR 1920, 6.

70. J.Melling, 'Clydeside housing and the evolution of state rent control' in idem (ed.), Housing, Social Policy and the State (London 1980), 139-67, discusses these controls.

71. Bowley, 82.

short, it became far more difficult for exclusion practices to be based on housing standards, via rents and incomes; for even good quality working-class housing was within the grasp of a group larger than the former 'labour aristocracy'.

Although the housing market was less than free, supply and demand were still important factors. Housing supply was severely limited: there was very little working class housing built in the pre-war decade, and none at all during the war; after the war the Town Council was less than enthusiastic in taking up the opportunities offered under successive Housing Acts, so that its schemes made little impact in volume terms until the mid-'twenties. (See table 4.17.) Private enterprise building was also at a low level, so the process of 'filtration' (by which accommodation was meant to 'filter down' through the social scale as the richer built new houses and those they vacated were sub-divided)<sup>72</sup> could have little effect.

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Table 4.17 Houses built (completions) in Edinburgh 1923 - 1927

	<u>1923</u>	<u>1924</u>	<u>1925</u>	<u>1926</u>	<u>1927</u>
<u>By Private enterprise:</u>					
<u>*Without state assistance</u>					
(b)	(a)	(a)	301	245	309
<u>*With state assistance</u>	2	82	223	562	589
<u>By Local Authorities (with</u>					
<u>state assistance)</u>	494	89	851	789	1112
<u>*of which, slum</u>					
<u>clearance</u>		44	442	324	44
Totals	496(a)	171(a)	1375	1596	2010

Notes: (a) No returns, so totals incomplete; (b) years to 31 August, except 'Private enterprise without state assistance': 30 September.

Source: Milnes, 176.

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It is more difficult to reach a clear view of housing demand, especially working class demand. There was a substantial rise in

72. Cp 'Filtration' in The Red Flag 1, 1927, 14; R.Tressell, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists (London 1959), esp. 79.



family formation figures ('the only reasonable indicator as to the level of likely demand', according to John Butt)<sup>73</sup> after the war, as table 4.18 shows, and birth figures suggest a still greater pressure on space within each housing unit.

Table 4.18 Marriages and births in Edinburgh, 1914 - 1927

	<u>No.</u>	<u>Marriages</u> <u>Rate per 1000 pop<sup>n</sup></u>	<u>Births</u>
1914	3165	9.7	6466
1919	4690	13.8	5612
1920	4483	13.4	7774
1921	4610	11.0	9028
1922	4057	9.6	8772
1923	4164	9.8	8662
1924	3963	9.3	8404
1925	4065	9.6	7843
1926	3823	n.a.	7926
1927	3861	n.a.	7621

Note: figures for 1914-20 relate to Edinburgh proper; those for 1921-27 include Leith, Liberton, Colinton, Corstorphine and Cramond.

Source: Edin. Public Health Department Annual Reports, each year.

Some idea of the class distribution of housing demand can be gained from the statistics, collected by the Public Health Department, of population density by wards. Overall, the City's population density increased during this period, in line with the population increase. If, however, we compare the changes in density over these years in those wards normally described as working class, with the changes for the City as a whole (see table 4.19), it is clear that in all cases except one the increase in population density during the war years was greater than the overall increase.<sup>74</sup> (It needs to be stressed, of course, that these wards' population densities were in any year well above the City's mean.) Certain reservations must be expressed about these figures, however, and it is thus helpful to look also at the number

73. J. Butt, 'Working class housing in Glasgow, 1851-1914' in S. Chapman (ed.) The History of Working Class Housing. A Symposium (Newton Abbot 1971), 73.

74. According to the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland (Cd. 8731, 1917), 345, war work caused 'a very considerable influx of workers. The housing accommodation is not only taxed to its utmost, it is overtaxed and overcrowded.'

Table 4.19      Changes in population density in Edinburgh

	<u>1914</u>	<u>1919</u>	<u>1922</u>	<u>1925</u>
Edinburgh:	96.0	100	97.0	97.0
<u>Wards:</u>				
Calton	95.4	100	92.4	90.6
Canongate	97.3	100	92.3	90.8
St.Stephen's	94.2	100	100.2	90.6
St.Andrew's	93.3	100	92.0	92.5
St.Giles'	95.9	100	85.3	82.8
Dalry	94.3	100	91.2	89.5
George Square	96.0	100	88.9	87.1
St.Leonard's	93.4	100	90.3	88.7

Notes: 1919 = 100 throughout. Edinburgh figure is for the 1914 and 1919 boundaries throughout.

Sources: calculated from Edinburgh Public Health Department Annual Reports, each year.

of households occupying just one and two rooms in the city. These rose significantly, by 4.3 per cent and 9.7 per cent respectively during the war years; and, though less rapidly, continued to rise during the years through to 1925 (see table 4.20). All

Table 4.20      Households occupying one and two rooms, Edinburgh 1914-25

<u>Edinburgh</u>	<u>One Room</u>		<u>Two Rooms</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Top 5 wards per cent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Top 5 wards per cent</u>
1914	5771	73.3	19,783	54.4
1919	6017	72.8	21,705	55.2
1922	6157	73.0	21,971	55.2
1925	6059	72.1	22,097	55.3
<u>Leith</u>				
1922	1222		8,238	
1925	1243		8,240	

Notes: (1) 'Top 5 wards': per centage of one-and two-roomed households in each year found in five wards with largest number of such households; (2) Edinburgh and Leith according to 1914-1919 boundaries; (3) in each year, the top 5 wards were found to be the same, viz., for one-roomed households: Canongate, St. Andrews, St. Giles', George Square, St. Leonard's; for two-roomed households: Calton, Canongate, Gorgie, Dalry, St. Leonard's.

Sources: (calculated from) Edin. Public Health Department Annual Reports, each year.



three indicators, therefore, point to intensified working class demand for housing during the war, and at least two suggest that the demand continued to be high throughout our period.

When combined with the shortage of supply and the imperfections of the housing market at this time, the level of demand suggests significant alteration in the social allocation of housing. In particular, it seems that the stratum of skilled manual workers, often identified as central to the late Victorian working class structure, lost some of its ability to isolate itself: and this, of course, is one way of describing the weakening of the stratum itself as a distinct entity. A parish minister, for instance, reported in 1922, that 'several respectable families' were living in the tenement (mentioned in section 3.2) of 80 or 90 residents whose vermin were so active and resilient.<sup>75</sup>

Yet the evidence suggests that, despite the pressure on these forms of working class stratification, they were not eliminated. The impression of the Presbytery investigators was of the respectable holding out in difficult circumstances. They rejected, for example, the notion that the inhabitants of such stairs were 'unfitted to the responsibility of being tenants,' as it was applied 'indiscriminately':

Characters of this kind are too common,  
but the local patriotism of the lobby  
and the stair in better instances  
repudiates them. 76

The proportion of 'well-kept' rooms was 'high', 'considering the cramped conditions';<sup>77</sup> and although the lack of privacy made 'any form of intelligent study or practice in the Arts or in Religion ... very difficult', there were 'occasional breaks in the clouds':

Sometimes the people possess gramophones  
and a selection of overtures: they  
generally read the evening paper; and their  
taste, if it passes beyond china dogs and  
family photographs, relieves the walls with  
surprising reproductions of good paintings. 78

Leaving aside the sense in which this tells us as much about the attitudes

75. Joint Committee, Housing of the Poor, 10.

76. Ibid., 11.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 13.

of the investigators as about the people investigated, the suggestion is that the attitudes and lifestyles of the pre-war 'respectable' working class did not die as quickly as a purely economic analysis might lead us to expect. Within a housing market which allowed less differentiation, and within an economic climate which severely pressurised the economic basis of such values, the values and attitudes themselves seem to have preserved important elements of pre-war stratification, at least to the extent that many cultural manifestations of group exclusiveness were preserved.

Moreover, the erosion of the structural basis of stratification within the working class housing market should not be exaggerated: whilst stratification was undermined during the war, and during the post-war years until the mid-1920s, it was not eliminated. Indeed, it is the persistence, and even intensification, of working class segregation that has won the most attention from social historians, who have tended to focus on longer-term trends.<sup>79</sup> In Edinburgh, such segregation did intensify in the later 'twenties and during the 'thirties, as the new corporation housing schemes were completed; for, among other factors, the higher rents charged for these gave renewed significance within the housing market to family income. A comment by the Medical Officer of Health in 1924 is evidence both of this, and of the official incomprehension of the realities of working class incomes:

It is apparently a waste of time and energy to attempt to convince many people who live in slums that a £15 house provided with such conveniences as electric light, gas boiler, hot water system, wash-house, tub and sink, drying green, and open-air all round, is in every possible direction worth £5 more than the dungeon-like slum devoid of almost every comfort that a human habitation should possess. 80

79. E.g., Cronin, esp. 121.

80. W. Robertson, MOH, in Edin. Public Health Department, AR 1924, v; the Chief Sanitary Inspector reported his officials' 'Repeated visits' to tenants in the Canongate-Grassmarket area: 'although a number of tenants were induced to go to Lochend, the majority were very apathetic and a variety of excuses were made. Many averred that the rents were too high, and others that they did not want to leave the district.' (Ibid., 73-4). Cp Barclay and Perry, 31: 'The rents charged for new houses (including rates) average 13s. for three-roomed houses, and 15s. for four-roomed houses. These rents are obviously outside the range of the low-paid worker....'



Certainly there were also non-economic disincentives to moving,<sup>81</sup> but the strong suggestion from the evidence is that those who moved to the new schemes consisted chiefly of the 'respectable' working class (though it is not clear that we can treat these simply as the skilled workers and their families). In 1928, for instance, sanitary inspectors found that only thirty, out of 600, tenants who moved to new Corporation houses 'continued to show careless inclinations' in their domestic habits.<sup>82</sup> But, in an important sense, the re-assertion of important segregation based on income from the later 'twenties only serves the stress its relative absence during our period: the post-war years were special, and they stand out in large measure because of the pressures to which existing patterns and trends of intra-class fragmentation were exposed.

We can, then, draw two kinds of conclusion from this chapter's discussion. Firstly, we can say that the structure of the working class was changing: pre-war patterns of fragmentation were placed under various, but continuous, pressures. Yet no new, single, dominant pattern emerged to replace them. Rather, relics of the old patterns, combined with newly-emerging (and sometimes transient) sources of fragmentation, produced a complex network of intersecting divisions: thus the ability of any of these fragmentations to produce culturally exclusive groupings was limited. A recent author captures the essence of this process: the 'working class ... was, if not more internally homogeneous, at least less sharply divided within itself ... than its Victorian analogue had been'.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, during the war, many aspects of the economic and social conditions of working class life had deteriorated. Afterwards, some advances were made; but after 1920 or 1921,

81. E.g., 'systematic visitation' and 'constant supervision' of council tenants by 'Women Sanitary Inspectors', using 'encouragement, persuasion, practical advice, and failing these, ... sterner methods,' had 'wonderfully good results in improving the habits of the people'. Chief Sanitary Inspector's reports in Public Health Dept. ARs 1927, 81-2; 1928, 94.

82. Ibid., 1928, 94. The Chief Sanitary Inspectors assumptions about workers 'careless inclinations' are illustrated in *ibid.*, 1924, 73-4; 1926, 73; 1927, 81-2; 1928, 94.

83. Cronin, 121.

any improvements were small, and must be set against substantial areas of deterioration.

So Edinburgh's working class had many grounds for grievance during our period. We may also suppose that it was more likely to respond, in a concerted manner, to arguments which legitimised action against those grievances, for the degree of internal division was reduced. We cannot, however, say what form that action could take: it might, as some have argued, involve a growth in electoral support for the Labour Party;<sup>84</sup> or it might be more militant, even revolutionary, collective action. The evolution of different forms of class action is the subject of the remainder of our study.

84. E.g., Chamberlain; see also H.C.G. Matthew, R.I. McKibbin, J.A. Kay, 'The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour Party,' Eng. Hist. Rev. 91, 1976, 723-52.



Part ThreeIndustry, Management and Labour

'the human complex (the collective worker) of an enterprise is also a machine which cannot, without considerable loss, be taken to pieces too often and renewed with single new parts.'

Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 303.

'This "rationalisation of industry" is ... only "rational" in the long run if it is not based on the physical, and, still less on the nervous exhaustion of the workers.

'But at the present moment attention is chiefly concentrated only on the rationalisation of industrial processes, and little or none is given to the more rational use of the worker ...'

The Labour Standard, 8 May 1927.

## Chapter 5

### Economic Development and the Organisation of Work

#### 5.1 Introductory

'There is one strange image that,' in the words of Raymond Williams, 'we all grew up with: that of the [labour movement's] industrial and political wings.'<sup>1</sup> Although just what each of these 'wings' consists of, and how they are related, have usually been unclear, our division of parts III and IV follows this imagery. In part III we are concerned with labour's industrial 'wing': with how and why its support grew between 1917 and 1920, but then declined; with the character and development of trade unions (the organisational expression of this 'wing'). But we are also concerned to understand the industrial sources of labour's strength since they are variables in our later discussion (in part IV) of the movement's 'political wing'.<sup>2</sup>

We pursue these concerns in three chapters. Chapters 6 and 7 explore various aspects of the development of industry, and of union organisation and methods, in Edinburgh. The present chapter is a preface to their explorations. We argue that existing accounts of British economic development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are inadequate for the purpose of explaining the development of work organisation, industrial relations, and trade unions; and we suggest three respects in which they require elaboration.

1. In M.Jacques and F.Mulhern (eds), The Forward March of Labour Halted? (London 1981), 143.
2. The use of the terms 'industrial' and 'political' involves an element of imprecision, as each can have (at least) two distinct meanings: one referring to a mode of activity, the other to a context.



## 5.2 The standard account

There are three main aspects to the 'standard account' of capitalist development in later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century Britain.<sup>3</sup> According to some, they together constitute 'a "second industrial revolution"'.<sup>4</sup> The first aspect is the increasingly deep involvement of science in industrial technology. Whereas in the early stages of industrialisation the important inventions rested on a traditional body of scientific and technical knowledge, much of it embodied in the skills of workers, the major technical advances of the later nineteenth century were increasingly dependent on a high level of scientific sophistication. Two of the major growth industries of this period, for instance, - electricity and chemicals - were entirely contingent upon scientific advances. In consequence, industry began to harness scientific expertise:

At first science costs the capitalist nothing since he merely exploits the accumulated knowledge of the physical sciences, but later the capitalist systematically organises and harnesses science, paying for scientific education, research, laboratories, etc., out of the huge surplus social product which either belongs directly to him or which the capitalist class as a whole controls in the form of tax revenues. 5

3. This interpretation can be found in a variety of works, some of which expound it, whilst others merely assume it. A very clear version is in E.J.Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (Harmondsworth 1969) 172-8; much the same position is taken by D.Landes, The Unbound Prometheus (Cambridge 1969), ch.5. It is assumed by H. Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital. The degradation of work in the twentieth century (New York 1974) cp. esp. chs. 3, 4, 7.
4. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, 172.
5. Braverman, 156.

Harry Braverman refers to this as a 'scientific-technical revolution.'<sup>6</sup>

The second aspect of this standard account can itself be divided into two. On the one hand, the scale of economic enterprise grew: capital ownership became concentrated, the size of productive units increased. On the other, there was a 'systematic extension of the factory system':<sup>7</sup> in particular, the manufacturing process was divided into a series of relatively simple tasks, each of which could be executed by a - power-driven - machine, requiring relatively little skill from its operator. Whilst factory production, and even mass production, were not in themselves new, it is argued that not until late in the nineteenth century did they become widespread.

The final aspect is, for our purposes, the most important. As production became increasingly concentrated, as the division of labour in the factory intensified, as the scientific and research aspects of the enterprise became more significant, so the co-ordination and control

6. An illustration of this process, with added local colour, is to be seen in the life of Sir Alred Ewing (1855 - 1935). After studying at Edinburgh University under its first Professor of Engineering (the chair was established in 1868), he held engineering or mechanics chairs successively at the Imperial University of Tokyo (1878-83), and the University of Dundee (1883-90) and Cambridge (1890-1902). Under his direction the Cambridge school grew 'almost at an embarrassing rate' (DNB, 2625) until it became 'the foremost engineering school in Great Britain' (Beare, 'Engineering', 108). At both Dundee and Cambridge he acted as an advisor to industry, particularly in two areas: the strength of materials, and engine design. Yet it may be said that his life encapsulates not only the increasingly close relationship between science and industry, but also its relatively limited impact in Britain. Apart from contributing his expertise in essentially traditional areas of industry (heavy engineering and shipbuilding), his later career illustrates a highly conservative world view. Having declined the opportunity, in 1899, to become first director of the National Physical laboratory, he accepted, in 1902, the post of Director of Naval Education. He remained at the Admiralty until 1917 when he was appointed Principal of Edinburgh University, a position he held until 1929 (and where he was, inter alia, responsible for instituting the Ph.D.degree). Cp. A.W.Ewing, The Man of Room 40. The Life of Sir Alfred Ewing (n.d./c.1939/); E.I.Carlyle, 'Sir (James) Alfred Ewing', DNB, 2625; T.H.Beare, 'Engineering' in British Association, Edinburgh's Place in Scientific Progress (Edin. and London 1921) 100-112. For another example, cp M.Sanderson, 'The Professor as Industrial Consultant: Oliver Arnold and the British Steel Industry 1900-14', Econ.HistRev.31, 1978, 585-600

7. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, 174.



of the productive process became itself a problem. The solution to this was found, it is argued, in 'scientific management', which

became both a programme and a reality in the 1880s, chiefly under the impact of F.W.Taylor, of the U.S.A. By 1900, therefore, the foundations of modern large-scale industry had been laid. 8

'Scientific management' assumed that efficiency lay in the minute sub-division of the production process. But Taylorist 'scientific management' also asserted that management should have absolute control over the labour process, should be able to dictate to each worker the precise manner in which his or her task was to be executed. This had two important consequences. Firstly, the discretion removed from each worker had to be invested in an elite group: management therefore became a more specialised task, an aspect of the division of labour, with the function, inter alia, of measuring, calculating, and subsequently prescribing, all 'scientifically', how each job should be carried out. Secondly, since one of Taylor's prime objectives was the elimination of 'systematic soldiering',<sup>9</sup> and since the motivation of workers was essentially 'economically rational', management's role also lay in the prescription of economic incentives to hard work, chiefly through systems of 'payment by results', and in the close supervision of (and disciplining of errant or lazy) workers.<sup>10</sup>

This account of trends in the structure of industry between the 1880s and the 1920s is, however, insufficiently specific to explain the development of work organisation and labour behaviour. For instance, it would be accepted at the same time by some who would argue that these trends led to the passive subordination of the working class,<sup>11</sup> and by

8. Ibid., 176; a similar view of the impact of scientific management is put forward by Braverman, esp. 86-91.
9. Cp, e.g., F.W.Taylor, Shop Management, in his Scientific Management, (New York and London 1947), 32-33, quoted Braverman, 98.
10. There are many accounts of Taylorism and 'Scientific Management'. This account rests especially on Braverman, ch.4 and A.Fox, Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations (London 1974) 191-5.
11. Cp T.Elger, 'Valorisation and "deskilling": a critique of Braverman', C.and C. 7, 7, 1979, esp. 60.

others who would contend that large-scale working class resistance and rebellion were provoked.<sup>12</sup> Probably the chief reason is that most historians' object of explanation has been different: either they have been interested in more general issues, such as economic growth; or, as Braverman, their methodology has excluded worker behaviour as a significant variable in the development of work organisation.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, their focus has been on long-term trends,<sup>14</sup> which inevitably downgrades the importance of contradictory, but temporary, short term developments. One of the assumptions of our study of a relatively brief period, however, is just 'the importance of the short run in union behaviour.'<sup>15</sup>

We must, then, amend this account in various ways: we must make it more specific by introducing certain elaborations and qualifications. The first concerns the specificity of the Scottish economy; the second concerns the relationship of management organisation to industrial structure; while the third concerns management strategy.

### 5.3 The Scottish economy and industrial innovation

The development of capitalist economies is uneven. During the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Scottish economy was marked by a number of distinctive features: these were associated with conservative and individualistic attitudes to industrial and economic decision making. The

12. E.g., for the USA, D.Montgomery, 'The "New Unionism" and the transformation of workers' consciousness in America, 1909-22; Journal of Social History 7, 1974, 509-29; for Great Britain, G.Brown, Sabotage, A Study in Industrial Conflict (Nottingham 1977), esp. 133-61, Hinton, esp. 98. Sociological explanations are surveyed by Fox, Beyond Contract.
13. A.Friedman, 'Responsible autonomy versus direct control over the labour process,' C. and C. 1, 1977, 44.
14. E.g., Braverman: Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire.
15. J.Lovell in conference report, BSSLH 41, 1980, 17.



economy was dominated by heavy industry - heavy engineering, shipbuilding, iron manufacture, coalmining - of what is termed the 'traditional' type.<sup>16</sup> Eight staple industries produced 60 per cent of Scottish output in 1913.<sup>17</sup> Much of this production was exported, and much of this went to the empire. Many of the major enterprises before the war were family concerns (in practice, if not always in theory): 'Only in the case of the railways and some newer firms in oil and electricity was the family principle not to be found', yet even these tended to be closely associated with banking and financial companies in which families were still represented.<sup>18</sup> Scottish financial interests, centred in Edinburgh, were internationally-oriented: more interested in overseas investment than with domestic profitability.<sup>19</sup>

So there was little restructuring of industry or rationalisation in the pre-war years. Numerous company amalgamations between 1890 and 1914

involved the fusion of independent family concerns into a holding company structure in which there was little reorganisation at the technical or financial level. The device of a holding company was mainly a way of regulating sales or output or of enabling a number of small firms to raise capital through the stock exchange flotation of a more marketable holding company. 20

16. See N.K.Buxton, 'Economic Growth in Scotland between the Wars: the Role of Production Structure and Rationalisation' Econ. Hist. Rev. 33, 1980, esp. 547-9 for a useful analysis of this frequently-made point.
17. C.Harvie, No Gods and Precious Few Heroes, Scotland 1914-1980 (London 1981), 1.
18. J.Scott and M.Hughes, The Anatomy of Scottish Capital. Scottish Companies and Scottish Capital, 1900 - 1979 (London 1980), 54; cp. also 49-53.
19. Ibid., 22-37, 64.
20. Ibid., 54.

Levels of investment in manufacturing industry were relatively low (in 1908, for instance, 'railways accounted for almost three-quarters of the money invested in Scottish joint-stock companies!');<sup>21</sup> thus domestic profitability declined, encouraging overseas and imperial ventures. As Bruce Lenman observes, 'such links could be self-reinforcing.'<sup>22</sup>

Scottish industry's conservative approach was confirmed by the impact of war. Lenman captures the cruel reality:

The nature of the First World War - a bloody struggle fought in the end by armies of millions in trenches in France, where the main business for most of the War consisted of the relentless slaughter of infantry by massed artillery - could scarcely have been better designed to enhance demand for Scotland's traditional products. 23

Rationalisation and restructuring during the war were largely imposed on industry from without, and were not reflected at the level of company structure: such company amalgamations as did occur during the war and thereafter, continued to take the 'holding company' form.<sup>24</sup> The post-war boom - lasting at best into the first half of 1921 - again offered the prospect of continuing heavy demand in the industries of Scotland's traditional strength. There was thus little apparent need for a thoroughgoing re-assessment of investment and market strategies. Yet the post-war boom obscured the wartime loss of markets, and (it is argued) further erosion of competitiveness through quality deterioration.<sup>25</sup>

21. Harvie, 5.

22. B.Lenman, An Economic History of Modern Scotland 1660 - 1976 (London 1977), 192, See also Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, esp. 306-9; T.Dickson (ed.), Scottish Capitalism. Class State and Nation from before the Union to the Present (London 1980) esp. 245-54.

23. Lenman, 208.

24. Scott and Hughes, 67.

25. Lenman, 211.



The recession, which bit deep in Scotland with its narrow industrial base, did bring industrial restructuring in its wake: 'Concentration and monopolisation proceeded apace and consolidated the position of the large firms' in every sector.<sup>26</sup> But the assumptions behind the strategic choices remained in the defensive mould set before the war. During the boom, for instance, confident of demand, the majority of British shipbuilders attempted to secure their steel supplies, often by purchasing steel producers; their expectations disappointed, they turned to price fixing agreements, negotiations (often fruitless) with continental competitors,<sup>27</sup> only 'when all else failed to seek a solution in various forms of rationalisation.'<sup>28</sup> Yet these were rational responses to low, if unpredictable, demand. Uncertainty, induced by recession, encouraged defensiveness, but discouraged radical restructuring. To pursue the example of shipbuilding (whose problems were but those of recession writ large) market unpredictability led to the maintenance of excess capacity in both labour and plant, as intense competition encouraged rapid delivery times and the ability to fulfil a variety of orders, and thus to a shortage of finance for technological innovation.<sup>29</sup>

Save, perhaps, during the War, then, the Scottish economy in our period generally discouraged both innovative investment and organisational restructuring. Yet both are fundamental elements of all three aspects of the 'standard account' of economic development: utilising scientific advances in industrial technology; extending factory production and increasing the size of enterprises; and introducing 'scientific management'. If both these elements were absent, any explanation of the growth of trade unionism or work organisation which rests on the 'standard account', must be revised.

26. Scott and Hughes, 66.

27. P.L. Payne, 'Rationality and Personality: a study of mergers in the Scottish iron and steel industry, 1916 - 1936', Business History, 19, 1977, 166-8.

28. Ibid., 168.

29. A. Slaven, 'A Shipyard in Depression: John Brown's of Clydebank 1919-38', Business History 19, 1977, 193-4.

#### 5.4 Images of organisation and the organisation of management

The second deficiency of the 'standard account' lies in its assumptions that the organisational form of advancing industrial capitalism was 'scientific management', and that this was the embodiment of organisational rationality and efficiency. In this section we suggest that while 'scientific management' in a general (rather than a specifically Taylorist) sense was widely assumed to be the best method of organisation in the years around the turn of the century, its effectiveness was limited, and that it was sorely tested during and after the Great War.

By 1914 few doubted that hierarchical bureaucracy was fundamental to efficient management; whilst the 'scientific management' movement added strength to this belief, it was not confined to Taylor's devotees alone. Even the most routine management texts assumed it:<sup>30</sup> Its ascendancy is most graphically shown in the stark simplicity of the organisation chart.<sup>31</sup> Its importance was explained by two main metaphors, illustrating (if generally implicitly) the co-ordinating and controlling functions of management. On the one hand, 'factory organisation is very similar ... to a machine': just as 'Efficiency in a machine is a result of good material, proper design, and careful operation', so in a factory 'there must be definite objectives toward which the separate and combined efforts of all members of the organisation are directed'.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, with regard to labour control, a works manager's 'requirements of character, initiative, decision, leadership, practical psychology or understanding of men, technical knowledge, etc., are very similar' to those of 'an officer in the British Navy';<sup>33</sup> whilst foremen were seen as our 'non-commissioned officers',<sup>34</sup> in organisations of essentially military structure.

30. See, e.g., F.N. [asmith], 'Factory Management', in An Encyclopaedia of Industrialism (Nelson's Encyclopaedic Library, London, n.d. [c.1913]), 207-23.

31. For contemporary examples of the organisation chart, cp J.F. Whiteford, Factory Management Wastes: and how to prevent them (London 1919) 221-2.

32. Ibid., 10-11.

33. W.J. Deeley, Labour Difficulties and Suggested Solutions. A Manual for Technical Students, Cashiers, Foremen, Departmental or Works Managers and Employers (Manchester 1918), 129.

34. John Brown and Co. Ltd., UCS 23/3, 'Memorandum on the Shortage of Ironworkers at Clydebank', quoted in J. Melling, ' "Non-Commissioned Officers": British employers and their supervisory workers, 1880-1920' Social History, 5, 1980, 209-10.



Now the problem with a managerial structure of this kind - approximating to what Tom Burns and G.M. Stalker have termed a 'mechanistic' management system<sup>35</sup> - is that its effectiveness is limited to relatively stable conditions. Rapid changes in market conditions, or technological innovation, or rapid changes in workers' behaviour, can render it highly ineffectual. The achievement of the later Victorian period was in large part the extension of large-scale production, and of a mass market in Britain and overseas, which could sustain unprecedented levels of demand through a wide spectrum of inter-related industries and markets; on this basis a relative stability was attained, which permitted the growth of 'mechanistic' management systems.

The war brought frequent and rapid changes to the managerial environment. The labour market changed; the government increasingly intervened in matters of supply and demand; the Factory and Workshop Acts were suspended. Apart from becoming deeply involved in the direction of industry, government actually managed substantial sections of it. By 1918 over 3,400,000 people were employed in munitions work, and about 2,250,000 in controlled establishments - in which the Ministry of Munitions exercised many of the central functions of management, determining hours, work rules, and wages.<sup>36</sup> The post-war period was also highly unstable. During the boom years, not only was labour in a position of almost unprecedented peacetime strength, but the structure of markets had rapidly to readjust to peacetime conditions, overseas contacts had to be reconstructed, in many cases the end of war production involved a move to substantially different products and markets. And within two years, of course, the boom was passing, leaving managers to confront the problems caused by constantly inadequate demand.

Such constant 'revolutionising' of the managerial environment placed great strains on existing organisational structures - and,

35. T.Burns and G.M.Stalker, The Management of Innovation (London 1966), 119-20.

36. G.R.Rubin, 'The Origins of Industrial Tribunals: Munitions Tribunals during the First World War', Industrial Law Journal 6, 1977, 162.

though implicitly, on existing images of management organisation. Instability of this kind requires non-programmed decision-making, for which mechanistic management systems are ill-designed. There appear to be two ways in which organisations can adjust to such circumstances. They can move toward adopting, explicitly, a form of organisation which is

appropriate to changing conditions, which give rise constantly to fresh problems and unforeseen requirements for action which cannot be broken down or distributed automatically arising from the functional roles defined within a hierarchic structure. 37

This form, which Burns characterises as 'organic', lays stress on the exercise by all members of an organisation of functions and responsibilities which are not predefined, but which must 'be constantly redefined through interaction with others participating in the discharge of common tasks or the solution of common problems.'<sup>38</sup> This requires widespread knowledge of - and commitment to - the objectives and situation of the concern as a whole; and it implies an emphasis on lateral, rather than merely vertical, interaction within the organisation. This response, however, demands a correct identification of the problem by those in authority within the organisation, and the ability to generate knowledge, commitment, and abilities amongst its members.

The second possible response to constantly changing circumstance is more common when notions of hierarchy and bureaucracy are deeply ingrained: it is

to redefine, in more precise and rigorous terms, the roles and working relationships obtaining within management along orthodox lines of 'organisation charts' and 'organisation manuals', and to reinforce the formal structure. 39

37. Burns and Stalker, 121.

38. T. Burns, 'On the Plurality of Social Systems', in T. Burns (ed.) Industrial Man (Harmondsworth 1969), 242. For Burn's comparison of mechanistic and organic systems, see Burns and Stalker, 119-22, and Burns, 242-3.

39. Burns, 'Preface to the Second Edition', Burns and Stalker, ix.



This, in short, involves efforts to 'make the system work' - with the strong assumption that interaction whose existence is not prescribed must be improper: and, conversely but perversely, that if it exists but is not prescribed, the formal structures must be respecified accordingly. The problem, of course, is that while such responses can be adequate where there is a single moment of change, where the change is constant, and unfamiliar circumstances are the norm, the formal structures tend to mushroom as institutions of various kinds are defined. Moreover, some of the (formal or informal) institutions generated may be dysfunctional to the mechanistic system.<sup>40</sup>

So the wartime and post-war period demanded organisational responses for which existing management structures and theory were ill-adapted; to assume the rationality and efficiency, regardless of their context, of 'mechanistic' managerial organisations is to obscure an important area of potential instability.

### 5.5 Managerial strategies and the organisation of work

We now turn from the organisation of management to a closely related issue: the strategies adopted by management, and its control over the work process. Broadly, historians have not distinguished these from management structure, and they have implicitly assumed the view most clearly articulated by Braverman. This notices a resonance between the increasingly detailed division of labour, inherent in the growth of factory production, and Taylorist 'scientific management', with its detailed breakdown of tasks; and proceeds to the conclusion that the latter is the logical consequence of the former (or, perhaps, that both are necessary consequences of the advanced capitalist mode of production).<sup>41</sup> Unable to control the worker's subjective state, the capitalist broke the production process into a multitude of discrete segments, in each

40. Ibid., ix- xi.

41. Braverman, esp. 70-123; see also, e.g.. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, 174-7.

of which the importance of the worker's mental attitude was minimised because the task was simple and precisely defined.

But this view that there was - so to say - a shared rationality, or essential structure, between the advanced capitalist mode of production and 'scientific management' is over-simple. Whilst there may have been a secular trend toward larger scale production and the division of labour, these were not inevitable choices: they brought many costs, not least a rise in the ratio of 'unproductive' to 'productive' labour, and a need for greater fixed capital investment. In uncertain economic conditions (or with conservative decision-makers), the changes necessary to implement 'scientific management' might appear unduly risky. Moreover, the tight control of production processes involved in 'scientific management' strategies required managements to be able to centralise all useful knowledge about production: this had then to be redistributed to the workforce on a 'need to know' basis.<sup>42</sup> Yet this greatly exaggerates most managements' ability to gather, store, evaluate and process information; and, conversely, greatly understates the positive role of labour in readjusting methods of production and overcoming problems.<sup>43</sup>

There was, in short, not merely a single possible, rational, and efficient strategy for management. Rather, a wide spectrum existed, from 'direct control' of the pure Taylorist variety (which controls labour by 'coercive threats, close supervision and minimising individual worker responsibility'), to 'responsible autonomy' which

attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing conditions in a manner beneficial to the firm. To do this top managers give workers status, authority and responsibility. Top managers try to win their loyalty and co-opt their organisations to the firm's ideals (that is, the competitive struggle) ideologically . 44

42. Braverman, esp., 109-18.

43. A.L.Friedman, Industry and Labour. Class Struggle at work and monopoly capitalism (London 1979), 95.

44. Ibid., 78; 'responsible autonomy' and 'direct control' strategies may be seen as instances (in relation to the management of workers) of 'organic' and 'mechanistic' management systems.



Strategies of the 'responsible autonomy' type are particularly appropriate to rapidly changing conditions, or to situations where labour is strong.

Now in the three or four decades before 1914, as production increasingly relied upon 'semi-skilled' labour (among whom trade unionism grew apace), the costs of imposing direct control strategies were considerable. Although direct control methods were 'the most visible aspect of managerialism during this period',<sup>45</sup> their impact has probably been exaggerated. The main reasons for this are the dominance of 'scientific management' in management literature (Taylorism and management could often appear synonymous);<sup>46</sup> and the fact that the spread of bonus systems and methods of payment by results has often been treated as sufficient evidence of the spread of scientific management.<sup>47</sup> With the war came a restructuring of output, the conscription of labour into the armed forces, and dilution involving 'the subdivision of processes, the installation of specialised machinery, the upgrading of existing labour, and the introduction of new labour.'<sup>48</sup> All this required the goodwill and expertise of existing workers, whose bargaining strength consequently increased; and although the 'dilutees' were often required to perform tightly specified tasks (reminiscent of Taylor's written instruction card scheme),<sup>49</sup> many were required to attain relatively high levels of sophistication.<sup>50</sup>

In short, both before and during the war, many employers had good reason to adopt significant measures of 'responsible autonomy'.

45. Ibid., 91.

46. Cp., e.g., 'F.N.', 'Factory Management.

47. Brown, 160.

48. History of the Ministry of Munition, IV, part iv, 74, quoted Melling, 213.

49. See, e.g., J. Maclean, 'The War after the War' (1917), In the Rapids of Revolution, Essays, articles and letters, 1902-23 (London 1978) 124-36; A.S. Milward, The Economic Effect of the World Wars on Britain, (London 1970), 33-7 and 41.

50. This can be seen from some of the literature produced to help dilutees: cp., e.g., E. Pull, The Munition Workers' Handbook. A Guide for Persons taking up Munition Work (London 1916) which aimed 'to provide in a small a space as possible all the practical information a person taking up munition work would be required to know, in order to start work in an engineering shop'.

After the armistice, these reasons did not necessarily disappear, as we shall see, although the depression shifted the balance of power against labour. The major feature of post-war management strategies was a movement akin to what Bryan Palmer has termed 'a "thrust for efficiency"': that is, 'an eclectic collection of managerial reforms and innovations',<sup>51</sup> motivated in Britain by notions of efficiency and reconstruction, but implying no particular strategy. Efficiency could, of course, be improved by strategies of 'responsible autonomy', as well as by 'direct control'. We shall see, in chapter 6, that the former were often used. But the language of the efficiency movement was overwhelmingly the language of 'direct control': machinery was efficient, <sup>the</sup> 'human factor introduces uncertainty in quantity and quality',<sup>52</sup> and unless 'centralisation of production control' could be achieved, there would be 'waste'.<sup>53</sup> Increasingly, efficient management and scientific management (if not in the strictest, Taylorian, sense) were widely assumed to be identical: the welfare movement, for instance, which in wartime appeared to offer an alternative to scientific management,<sup>54</sup> was by the mid-'twenties justifying its policies in identical language:

Our object is ... to eliminate all useless or ineffective expenditure of energy and all other kinds of waste. 55

This has intensified an historical confusion. Having failed, very often, to appreciate the possibility of rational strategies other than those of direct control, many historians have tended to conflate new management techniques (bonus schemes and so forth) with scientific management. But the reality in our period, was neither 'direct control' nor 'responsible autonomy', but generally an admixture of the two: we shall see in the next chapter how

51. B.Palmer, 'Class, Conception and Conflict: The Thrust for Efficiency, Managerial views of Labour and the Working Class Rebellion, 1903-22' Rev.Rad.Pol.Econ. 7(2), 1975, 31-49.
52. J.F.Whiteford, Factory Management Wastes: and how to prevent them (London 1919), 39.
53. Ibid.; 44-5.
54. See E.D.Proud, Welfare Work. Employers' experiments for improving working conditions in factories with a foreword by David Lloyd George (London 1916).
55. B.S.Rowntree in The Cocoa Works Magazine, 1923, quoted by Brown, 219; cp Rowntree, The Human Factor in Business (London 1920).



these strategies related to the strength of labour.

We have, then, questioned the value of the 'standard account' of economic development in explaining the development of labour - especially in a local and short-term study. We now turn to the development of work organisation and trade unionism in Edinburgh: in this we shall give due weight to the importance of short-run factors; we shall also ensure that our discussion of industrial development is sufficiently detailed to permit explanation at the level of specificity suggested in this chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Employers' Strategies and the Control of Work in Edinburgh

#### 6.1 Introductory

This chapter examines the industrial context in which Edinburgh's trade unionism developed during and after the Great War. We have, of course, already seen (in chapters 3 and 4) that the city's industrial structure was relatively heterogeneous; we have sketched the ebb and flow of her economic prosperity; and we have surveyed certain trends in the structure of her working class. Here we analyse the development of four of Edinburgh's industries in the light of the categories suggested in chapter 5.

The industries chosen are engineering, printing, rubber manufacture, and railway transport. These were selected for several reasons. Engineering and printing illustrate the profoundly varying developments of job control structures in two long-established industries; rubber was an industry with a very different economic situation, and one where unions were established only during the Great War; and on the railways union recognition was a very recent development in a highly complex industry. In addition, in 1921 engineering and printing were Edinburgh's two largest manufacturing industries in terms of employment; the railway was the largest employer in transport; while the rubber industry in Edinburgh was centred on the largest factory of any kind in the East of Scotland.



## 6.2 Engineering: structure and technology

The engineering industry was central to the processes of technological, organisational and managerial change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Relative to the economy of Scotland as a whole, the industry was of course under-represented in Edinburgh. Nevertheless, it remained the largest single (manufacturing) industrial group in the 1921 Census, and by a considerable margin; while engineers made a substantial contribution to the labour movement in the city.

A study of Edinburgh's engineering industry demonstrates the dangers of generalising overhastily (as Braverman, among others, perhaps does) from the experience of the more advanced sections of the industry. The bulk of the city's engineering firms developed areas of specialisation during the 1850s and 1860s: in many cases these specialisms were associated with the manufacture of capital equipment for other Edinburgh industries. Thus Bertrams, founded in 1821, was by the 1850s specialising in papermaking machinery;<sup>1</sup> a separate firm, James Bertram and Sons, was founded in 1845 for the same purpose;<sup>2</sup> Miller and Co., founded in 1867, specialised in the production of large chilled iron goods, notably rollers used in papermaking;<sup>3</sup> MacKenzie and Moncur, founded in 1900, specialised in large casting, particularly for papermaking machinery.<sup>4</sup> Similar 'servicing' origins are apparent in relation to other local industries: printing, ink and colour manufacturing, brewing, shipbuilding, rubber-manufacture, mining and so on (by the 1920s, of course, products were sold more widely than Edinburgh). 'With the diversity of requirements represented by these trades, a Professor Oliver wrote in the early 'thirties,

Edinburgh's engineering industry has developed along highly specialised lines where craft, skill, ingenuity and inventiveness rather than mass production prevail. 5

1. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 38-9.
2. C. Oakley, Scottish Industry Today. A Survey of Recent Developments (Edinburgh 1937), 144; Keir, City of Edinburgh, 616.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.; Oakley, Scottish Industry, 144-5.
5. Prof. W. Oliver, 'The Engineering Industries of Edinburgh', in Scottish Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Commerce, 47.

This was a division of labour, to be sure, but one significantly different from the classic model. For rather than integrating the entire production process within one factory, and then dividing it internally according to a centrally-determined pattern between different sub-processes and work-groups, here the division was not merely between workers but between units of capital. The production process was divided between various firms, as elements of it were sub-contracted from one to another.

This pattern persisted into the 1920s. The reasons are not to be found only in notions of 'backwardness' or 'conservatism' but in the nature of product and market. The manufacture of capital equipment was largely carried on in response to individual contracts, on each of which the specifications were likely to vary. The holding of stocks was thus both risky and expensive. One paper-making machine, for instance, might take a year to construct; a relatively large firm like Bertrams might, on average, make two a year.<sup>6</sup> In these circumstances, sub-contracting for components was an important method of spreading risks, since it reduced the fixed costs of production in any one firm. It also allowed firms to specialise, since sub-contracting firms might construct components not only for one firm, but for several (and not always for the same industry). In short, the costs of production and the uncertainty of demand put a premium on low fixed costs. To be sure, this doubtless appealed to a capital market which preferred short-run to long-run investment, and to firms which were small and often family-owned. But it was also itself a form of organising industrial capital, a method of structuring production so as to achieve economies of scale without surrendering flexibility. For these capital-goods industries, market uncertainty, and changes in product, were normal; and the entire industry could be organised accordingly. Similar considerations apply in relation to construction engineers, shipbuilders, and those firms ancillary to shipbuilding (such as Brown Bros., who made steering gear and similar components for ships).

6. Keir, City of Edinburgh, 616.



There were, of course, exceptions to this industrial structure: but they tend to be the sort which prove the rule. For instance, many shipbuilders at the end of the war, confident of full order-books for the foreseeable future, and aware of the strong demand for steel, attempted to secure their supplies by 'vertical integration' - purchasing steel makers.<sup>7</sup> The parlous state of inter-war shipbuilding is probably itself adequate comment on the success of this strategy, but we should stress the mood in which such steps were taken: confidence (albeit misplaced) of strong demand. One example of integrated production will demonstrate the importance of market factors. Between 1899 and 1914, nine types of motor car were manufactured in Edinburgh.<sup>8</sup> Few firms were commercially successful, but not because they adhered to outdated production methods. On the contrary, in at least one case a motor works was purpose-built: on a seven-acre site by the Granton branch of the Caledonian railway. Yet this site was occupied by three different manufacturers within six years, all of whom closed down (and one of whom went bankrupt): by the outbreak of War it had become a printing works.<sup>9</sup> The reasons were twofold: firstly, Scotland's heavy engineering had not led to the development of a network of component or sub-assembly producers appropriate to the motor industry (in contrast, say, to developments in the midlands of England). Most components for Scottish-built cars were imported from England or France, with consequently high transport costs. Secondly, the pre-war market for motor vehicles was not a Scottish one: there were roughly three times as many new vehicle registrations per head in London as in Scotland.<sup>10</sup> Economies of scale were thus achieved only

7. Payne, 'Rationality and personality', 166-7. This strategy, according to Payne, was adopted by 'the majority of British shipbuilders'. The Leith shipyard, Henry Robb, was probably too small to follow this strategy; but its formation in 1918 (incorporating three older Leith shipbuilders) is indicative of another response to confidence of continuing strong demand. On this amalgamation, cp Keir, City of Edinburgh, 617.
8. G.T.Bloomfield, 'New integrated motor works in Scotland 1899-1914', Industrial Archaeology Review, 5, 1981, 127.
9. Ibid., 130.
10. Ibid., 126 - 8.

at the price of an inflexibility which, with a shortfall in demand, left these companies dangerously exposed.

The fact that the manufacture of heavy capital goods placed a premium on flexibility of labour as well as of capital implied a relatively heavy dependence on the skills of the craftsman, and the more so as few of the firms were large enough to justify substantial managerial and research costs. Perhaps the extreme case of employers' explicit reliance of workers' responsibility is outworking, which was common in the city:

There is barely a shop in Edinburgh  
but which sends men out working,  
while extremely few in Glasgow do

declared an ASE negotiator;<sup>11</sup> and it was common ground that, in the words of the local engineering employers' chairman,

In most cases, with any normal firms,  
the outworker is a man who is known  
and there is trust given on both sides. 12

Outworkers<sup>13</sup> were governed by local agreements on conditions and allowances, but might be required to travel anywhere in Great Britain and Ireland to execute their tasks, and would do so unsupervised. But this is only the extreme case: within the workshops engineering craftsmen continued to exercise a considerable degree of what James Hinton calls 'craft control'.<sup>14</sup> H.N.Blyth's account on his apprenticeship at Brown Bros. during the war is evocative of this: the men whose role

11. George Gray, ASE, in ESAE&I and ASE, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Engineers' Working Rules', 19 September 1919, 29; cp also ibid., 6.
12. Mr. W.Wallace, Chairman, ESAE&I, in ESAE&I and ASE, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Outworking allowances', 22 January 1923, 11.
13. 'Workers normally employed in the shops who are sent outworking, normally to customer's works, to install, maintain or repair plant manufactured by their employer'. A.Marsh, Industrial Relations in Engineering (Oxford 1965), 177.
14. Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement, 93-6. This is not to claim that 'craft control' is in any strong sense 'workers' control': cp J.Monds, 'Workers' Control and the Historians: a new Economism,' NLR 97, 1976, 81-100, and Hinton's 'Rejoinder', ibid., 100-104.



is pre-eminent are not, despite their formal authority, the foremen, but rather 'the journeymen.'<sup>15</sup> The majority of Edinburgh's engineering employers were thus bound to adopt strategies which emphasised the 'responsible autonomy' of their workers: 'direct control' on any scale was neither economic nor, in many cases, even possible. Thus it was that payment by results was relatively rare in the industry in Edinburgh: the only clear example lies in the gas meter sector which, of course, was quite uncharacteristic.<sup>16</sup>

### 6.3 Engineering in war and peace

The common image of wartime rationalisation as involving the production of 'relatively standardised but often extremely complex goods in huge numbers'<sup>17</sup> is a great over-simplification: in Edinburgh, whilst there was rationalisation and war production, it was not necessarily mass production in this sense. And whilst there was a greater standardisation of product than previously, in many cases this was the production of standardised batches, rather than continuous production over years of identical products. Brown Bros., for instance, moved in a two year period from starting and reversing engines, to triple expansion engines, to searchlight gears, to tanks.<sup>18</sup> Productivity needed to be achieved quickly in each case, and could not rely on the construction of elaborate assembly lines for each new product. Thus employers (and government) rested heavily on the ability of skilled

15. H.N.Blyth, 'An apprentice fitter, 1915', Industrial Archaeology 16, 1982, 223-32. Blyth recounts one particularly revealing downgrading of his foreman. An Admiralty inspector visited to test a new engine. He passed it. 'The Managing Director was on the inspector's right and our foreman on his left. The inspector shook hands with the boss and our foreman hastily wiped a hand on the slack of his trousers in case it should be shaken too'. It was not: foreman and workers got merely 'a nod of approval'. Ibid., 227.
16. ESE&IA and AEU, Conference Proceedings, 'Proposed Reduction of 12½ per cent on piecework prices of brass finishers and brass moulders, in Gas Meter making works', 20 July 1922.
17. Milward, 33.
18. Blyth, passim.

workers to adapt production processes: clearly this meant a devolution of responsibility and decision-making, which tended to strengthen the pre-existing tendency to organic management structures. And, most importantly, after 1919 firms in general returned to their pre-war product structure. Whilst general lessons, about management, rationalisation, and so on might be carried over, the contexts of peace and war were very different.

Nevertheless, there was a drive to greater productivity, greater 'efficiency', less 'waste'. Partly, as we have seen, this was associated with the demands of war, although of course it was able to draw on deeper roots also.<sup>19</sup> There seems to have been a conscious effort on the part of certain elements of the state, among others, to demonstrate that the 'lesson of the war' - the importance of 'all working together for a common purpose' from which any diversion of energy was a waste - was equally valid in peacetime.<sup>20</sup> But after the War, and particularly after the boom of 1919 - 1921, the drive was bolstered by the increasing crisis in engineering. Edinburgh did not escape this unscathed. 'No skilled tradesman has had a worse time during the last five years than the engineer,' The Labour Standard recorded in 1926.<sup>21</sup> Engineers' pay, of course, declined steeply relative to other trades; and whilst the only major closure during our period was of the North British Railway's St. Margaret's

19. Especially the notion of 'national efficiency' which had been central to 'Liberal Imperialism': see H.C.G. Matthew, The Liberal Imperialists. The ideas and policies of a post-Gladstonian elite (Oxford 1973).
20. A. Clutton Brock, Our Common Purpose. The Economics of Peace (London, n.d. [1919], 4. This pamphlet was issued by the National War Savings Committee, a statutory body set up to oversee and encourage public saving following the first issue of national Savings Certificates in 1916. By 1920 it had dropped 'War' from its title.
21. Labour Standard, 6 March 1926.



Locomotive Erecting shop at Meadowbank,<sup>22</sup> the poor state of trade was a constant employers' complaint.<sup>23</sup>

The drive for efficiency was thus not limited to a single form, even within a single industry (of course, in many respects it is misleading to consider engineering a single industry). During the war employers became conscious of the strength of the workforce, and anxious to integrate it within a common definition of purpose for their enterprises. In wartime, too, such a definition was more readily available, more self-evident, and perhaps less questioned: recalling his wartime workmates, Blyth averred

I never saw any slackness in that works  
[Brown Bros.]. A few men held that the  
war was unnecessary because German employers  
could not possibly be worse than British ones  
and anyway the capitalist system was so rotten  
that it did not matter who held the power.  
These malcontents had next to no influence  
or following. 24

22. On this, cp Labour Standard, 17 October 1925, 2 January 1926; NUR Edin. No.1 branch minutes, 10, 24 August, 7, 21 September, 1924. The workshop was 'run down' over a period of years, and there are therefore various figures on the number of people affected, from 469 (NUR 7 September 1924) to 100 (Labour Standard, 17 October 1925). The closure was an immediate consequence of the reorganisation and rationalisation of the railway companies by the Railways Act 1921. But it was also associated with the depression, and especially the collapse of overseas markets: the North British Locomotive Co., of Glasgow, the major Scottish engine-builder, had built 400 locomotives a year on average between 1904 and 1914, mainly for export; between 1921 and 1931 the average was 150. Harvie, No Gods, 40.
23. Cp ESAE&I and ASE and SBU, Conference Proceedings, 'Brass-moulders' rates - Levelling up to Iron moulders', 4 April 1921, 4, 6, 8, 12; ESAE&I and AEU Conference Proceedings, 'in re Outworking Allowances', 22 January 1922, esp. 21, 23; E&AE (Eof S)A and AEU, Conference Proceedings, 'in re Allowances for repair work on Diesel, Semi-Diesel and Oil Internal Combustion Engines', 23 October 1925, esp. 2, 4, 29, 31; EC of E&AE (EofS)A and AEU, Conference Proceedings, 'in re Local Application for 20/- per week increase in wages,' 22 April 1926, esp. 3, 7-8, 12-14, 16, 19-21, 23, 31-2.
24. Blyth, 225.

(Though Blyth is not a sympathetic source on this.) But the attempt to integrate at the ideological or attitudinal level was bolstered by a willingness to make material concessions. Wages are the clearest example, rising 100 per cent for engineers between 1914 and 1919.<sup>25</sup> But employers were also prepared to make - perhaps had to make - concessions with potentially more lasting implications: especially in relation to workplace union organisation. In a remarkable local conference held in January 1918, for instance, district officials of the ASE raised the question of shop steward organisation: they did so, however, in order to ensure the development went along the right lines:

The whole thing, as far as we are concerned, resolves itself into this: we don't want any unofficial shop stewards started in the district. You quite understand our position. The official shop steward is under the direction of the district committee. That is the official body, and to have any unofficial body started would not be very desirable in this district at any rate, whatever may be said at Coventry. 26

But, in practice, the local employers were recognising shop stewards already, and seemed reluctant to jeopardise their in-plant working relationships for the sake of union structures. 'Of course,' the employer's chairman remarked, 'at the present time the greater part

25. TC AR 1919.

26. ESAE&I and ASE, Conference Proceedings, 'recognition of shop stewards as officials of the union', 18 January 1918, 9. The vehemence with which the speaker, Wilson Coates (ASE), made this point may have been influenced by several years as full-time national Organising Secretary of the National Union of Paper Mill Workers. There seems to have been at least one occasion when he was upset by his members, and where his approach to trade unionism involved strong ties with employers to ensure recognition, rather than organising workers directly. He was also upset by his union in 1916, when forced to resign in unclear (but evidently unpleasant) circumstances. See C.J. Bundock, The Story of the National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paper Workers (Oxford 1958), 374, 186-7. On the situation in Coventry, see Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement, 223-5.



of the firms [in Edinburgh] recognise a man as a shop steward;<sup>27</sup> the question which concerned them suggests they were finding resistance difficult:

how far will it go? That is really  
the point we should like to know. 28

To this, there was no reply.

It is widely held that the increasing complexity of payments systems during the war was a major factor in the development of shop-steward organisation in engineering.<sup>29</sup> Edinburgh appears to have been no exception to this rule: the employers' account of their recognition of shop-stewards focuses on piece-work as providing the issue around which stewards came to their attention;<sup>30</sup> whilst there was one example quoted, from a firm which manufactured heavy capital equipment, which lends support to this view from the opposite direction. 'We never knew until a few weeks ago that we had such a thing as a shop-steward about the place,' the firm's representative said. 'You have had shop stewards there for the last 16 years,' retorted the union negotiator.<sup>31</sup> This exchange indicates, first, that shop-stewards were

27. ESAE&I and ASE, Conference Proceedings, 18 January 1918, 3.

28. Ibid., 4. The context of this Conference should be explained. In December 1917, 13 unions reached agreement with the EEF on 'Regulations regarding the Appointment and Functions of Shop Stewards'. These 13 did not include the ASE, who appear (from this local negotiation) to have felt that the national agreement gave too much autonomy to shop stewards. The Edinburgh District Committee was therefore attempting to negotiate a local agreement which would cover this point, but the employers were unwilling to depart from the national guidelines. Clearly there was little chance of the ASE mobilising around an attempt to reduce shop stewards' autonomy, and the meeting broke up without agreement. For the national agreement see Marsh, 262-4.

29. Cp, e.g., G.D.H.Cole, Workshop Organisation (Oxford 1923), esp. 48-65; C.L.Goodrich, The Frontier of Control. A Study in British Workshop Politics (New York 1921), esp. 163-75; Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement, esp. 86-92; Brown, Sabotage. A Study in Industrial Conflict (Nottingham 1977), esp. 175-83.

30. ESAE&I and ASE, Conference Proceedings, 18 January 1918, 2-4.

31. Ibid., 4.

a well-established part of the engineering union world;<sup>32</sup> second, that where a firm relied on 'craft control', the role of the shop steward could be a quiescent one; and third, that the war posed all kinds of new questions for shop stewards.<sup>33</sup>

While the post-war boom lasted, there was little incentive for employers to press for greater efficiency. With unions relatively strong, with demand high, and with old markets to be reconquered, the opportunity cost of losing production through industrial disputes was high. There were also just many other things to do; not least organising the changeover from war production, in which workers' goodwill was an important asset. The achievement of 'efficiency' remained, in theory, an important managerial objective, and there was no slackening in the efforts to swing public opinion to the view that the common objective of workers and management should be the elimination of waste.<sup>34</sup> But in practice, the maximisation of output seems to have been the primary objective: profit margins might be smaller, but total profits would remain, and the future could be assured through recapturing market shares.

There was, therefore, little incentive for employers to attempt to assert some new form of direct control in the immediate post-war years. But a shift from a 'direct control' to a 'responsible autonomy'

32. Shop stewards had of course first been appointed by the ASE, officially, in 1892, and the ASE's defeat in 1897-8 (following which its executive adopted a strategy of co-operating with the EEF within the 1898 Terms of Settlement) left resistance de facto to them. But 1917 was the first national agreement relating to shop stewards. Cp. Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement, 80-82; J. Zeitlin, 'Craft control and the division of labour: engineers and compositors in Britain 1890 - 1930', Cambridge J. of Economics 3, 1979, esp. 270-72.

33. For instance, in the case quoted it was the arrival of a recruiting officer at the factory which brought the existence of the shop steward to management's attention.

34. On management theory, cp, e.g., Whiteford, Factory Management Wastes. On public opinion, anti-waste, and restriction of output, cp Goodrich, 176-85; M. Cowling, The Impact of Labour 1920 - 1924, The Beginning of Modern British Politics (Cambridge 1971), esp. 45-59.



strategy may be an effective control strategy for management:

If top managers decide to reduce their direct control over the direction of worker activity and the co-ordination of materials flows in order to increase their authority over workers, success in implementing this strategy will result in greater managerial control over productive activity as a whole, greater managerial control, given the reality of worker resistance. 35

The risk here is that we may confuse an erosion of managerial control with an attempt to assert control through indirect - 'responsible autonomy' - means; the danger is the more real since a 'responsible autonomy' strategy is precisely the more appropriate where worker resistance is a reality. In fact, the immediate post-war years are best interpreted in terms of overall erosion of managerial control; although simultaneously we do see attempts by employers to regain control by other means.<sup>36</sup>

With the onset of the recession in 1920-21, the ground shifted. Engineering was hit early and hard.<sup>37</sup> The principle of 'efficiency' again found material support. Workers found themselves increasingly on the 'long side' of the labour market. This eased management's problems in one respect at least: the need to motivate workers diminished.<sup>38</sup> To the extent that employees had tended to 'responsible autonomy' strategies and structures for this reason, they were now able to shift to tighter control over the workforce. But of course there were other reasons for employers' adoption of the 'responsible autonomy' approach, which were strengthened by the depression. Declining demand did not encourage the investment necessary to make direct control fully effective. Uncertainty of demand for central products put a premium on the ability to compete for orders over a

35. Friedman, Industry and Labour, 84.

36. Cp Goodrich, Frontier of Control.

37. Harvie, 39-40; Dickson, Scottish Capitalism, 247; cp Hannington Unemployed Struggles, 1-11.

38. The distinction between motivation and other aspects of managerial control is made by K. Stone, 'The Origins of Job Structures in the Steel Industry', Rev. Rad. Pol. Econ. 6(2), 1974, esp. 70.

relatively wide product range: this discouraged inflexible fixed investment, and positively encouraged reliance on workers' ability to adapt. Maintaining unwieldy management structures was increasingly risky, and its cost higher in relation to income.

In practice, Edinburgh's engineering employers seem to have steered a middle course. There was tightening-up, as employers attempted to reduce costs. According to a correspondent in The Labour Standard,

the conditions in many shops [in 1925] are as bad as possible. Speeding up and time-checking even for the lavatory has been brought to a fine art. 39

Although conditions clearly varied, there is no reason to treat this as mere hyperbole. But overall, Edinburgh's engineering employers seem to have sought less provocative methods of cutting costs. Working conditions were allowed to deteriorate, or installed at an inadequate standard.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps as a consequence, the AEU noticed 'a steady increase in our sick members' during the years after 1921.<sup>41</sup> The conditions of apprentices (a minority group for which, in practice if not in rhetoric, few journeymen seem to have been prepared to fight) were undermined in two ways. Firstly, they were taken on where adult labour was being laid off so that their proportion within the total engineering labour force grew, leading to comments that the industry was 'overrun' by apprentices in the mid-'twenties.<sup>42</sup> They

39. Labour Standard, 9 May 1925: 'Engineering Employers' Insult to Engineers'.

40. Cp P.Collins, 'Work for Electricians in Edinburgh', Labour Standard, 1 August 1925.

41. E&AEA(EofS) and AEU, Adjourned Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Local Application for 20/- per week increase in wages', 22 April 1926, 6 (T.Dewar, AEU). On the relation between working conditions and health there is now, of course, a large literature, but see esp. P.Kinnersly, The Hazards of Work, (London 1973); N.McDonald and M.Doyle, The Stresses of Work (Walton-on-Thames 1981); A.LeServe, C.Vose, C.Wigley, D.Bennett, Chemicals, Work and Cancer (Walton-on-Thames 1980).

42. Labour Standard 25 April 1925: Anon, 'How Capitalism has Ruined the Engineers.'



seem to have been employed, in many cases, as semi-skilled labour:

he/ir time spent in the workshop has been very frequently upon repetition work of no educational value. Instead of apprentices they have developed into cheap labour for the bosses .... 43

(Given the traditional attitude of journeyman to apprentice,<sup>44</sup> this may have had the additional effect of inducing the former to undertake informally, unpaid, and even unconsciously, certain supervisory functions in relation to semi-skilled labour.) Second, apprentices seem to have been easily manipulated. 'During the last six years of trade depression,' wrote an 'engineer' in 1927,

many apprentices have been stood off for weeks on end, and few boys have finished their four years' apprenticeship with more than three years actually in the workshop. The rest of the period they have been serving their time on the so-called dole. 45

Often, they were dismissed when their indentures expired, and full wages became due; in other cases, they were 'threatened with the sack unless they continue to work at apprentice wages'.<sup>46</sup> In short, they were often treated as cheap labour which could be easily manipulated, because their ability to resist (or induce others to resist on their behalf) was small.

Edinburgh's engineering employers then, generally continued their established managerial approach, (which involved more

- 43. Labour Standard 8 January 1927: 'Engineer', 'The New Heriot-Watt Trust and Apprentices'; the same point is made in the article in Labour Standard 25 April 1925. Cp the argument in ESAE&I and AEU Local Conference Proceedings, 'Question referred:- Young journeymen's rates (Edinburgh District)', 4 April 1921: here employers 'wished to pay young journeymen according to their ability', whilst the AEU was pressing for regularisation.
- 44. Cp Blyth, *passim*.
- 45. Labour Standard 8 January 1927.
- 46. Labour Standard 25 April 1925. A letter from 'Engineer' in response to this article alleged that 'One firm had the audacity to apply for more apprentices at the Labour exchange to start their time when over twenty of their apprentices were drawing Unemployment Benefit': Labour Standard 2 May 1925.

than normal reliance on the craft responsibility of their skilled employees), but tempered it with cost-cutting measures of various kinds. Two qualifications should, however, be made. Firstly, we must except those firms in which strides had been made toward standardisation, and where piecework was normal. This meant, above all, the gas-meter making industry. Although, taking the inter-war period as a whole, this was to be one of Edinburgh's successes - linked as it was to the market for 'consumer durables'<sup>47</sup> - during the early 'twenties it suffered.<sup>48</sup> The employers responded by cutting piecework rates.<sup>49</sup> In addition, foremen had a more important role in this sector, not merely supervising and coping with grievances, but directing jobs in detail, even undertaking initial negotiations with shop stewards on adjustments to piece rates.<sup>50</sup> It is likely that, after 1921, their role was enhanced.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, the bulk of the Edinburgh firms were federated within the East of Scotland Association of Engineers and Ironfounders<sup>52</sup> (and, through it, with the Engineering Employers' Federation). They showed

47. Oakley, 145-6.

48. Cp, e.g., ESE&IA and AEU, Conference Proceedings. 'Proposed reduction of 12½ per cent on piecework prices of brass finishers and brass moulders, in Gas Meter making works', 20 July 1922, esp. 9.

49. Ibid., passim.

50. ESAE&I and the Brassfinishers' Society, Conference Proceedings, 'Brassfinishers' piecework prices - application for advance of 20 per cent' 29 October 1920, esp. 5-6, 8, 9, 18-19, 23.

51. Cp Labour Standard, 9 May 1925.

52. From 1925, the Engineering and Allied Employers' Association (East of Scotland). On the development of the EEF, see Marsh, 41-52: between 1919 and 1924 the EEF was known as the Engineering and National Employer's Federation; 1924-1961 as the Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation. The Meter Making Employers' Federation merged with the EEF in 1919 or 1920: a fact which serves to emphasise the distinctiveness of this sector: ESAE&I and the Brassfinishers Society, Conference Proceedings, 'Brassfinishers piecework prices', 29 October 1920, 3-4.



no signs of reluctance in executing the policy of the Federation, notably in locking-out their employees in 1922, although there were signs that they were grateful for the opportunity it gave for them to evade direct responsibility for policies. And, clearly, it was the 1922 lock-out which comprehensively set the tone for industrial relations in engineering during the remainder of our period.

#### 6.4 Printing: technological change and industrial structure

The printing industry during and after the war was emerging from, and coming to terms with, a profound, technological revolution. The introduction into Britain of the Linotype and Monotype composing machines (in 1889 and 1899 respectively) rapidly undermined the skills of the hand compositor:<sup>53</sup> 'after four centuries of hand composing, in two brief decades the change, in larger offices, was complete.'<sup>54</sup> The Linotype came to dominate in newspaper printing, the Monotype in bookwork, which was central to Edinburgh's printing industry. They were both faster and more accurate than hand composing: 'a monotype machine sets 7,000 letters per hour as compared with 1,000 when they were set by hand, and sets them better.'<sup>55</sup> Making use of punched paper tape, which could be easily stored, the monotype enabled the setting of type for reprints to be done without a compositor: a considerable advantage in book-printing. In the wake of this fundamental technological breakthrough, other advances were made, which either offered increases in productivity in areas

53. Child, Printing Industry, 155-8.

54. Ibid., 165.

55. J.Gibson, 'Printing' in N.Milnes, Industrial Edinburgh, 204-5. A contemporary text-book estimated that where an 'expert in fast [hand] type-setting' might reach 4,000 letters per hour, and the norm was nearer 1000, a monotype operator would vary between 5,000 and 15,000: J.Southward, Modern Printing, A Handbook (London. 1924), Vol.I, 160, 399.

where craft labour had not been used in any case (self-feeding printing machines, folding machines, and so on),<sup>56</sup> or represented advances in specialised sectors of the industry, as offset printing revolutionised lithography.<sup>57</sup>

Edinburgh, of course, had long been a centre for printing.<sup>58</sup> Although it had its quota of small, jobbing, firms, the core of the industry lay in a number of medium and large-scale companies, contracting and selling not only locally but nationally and even internationally. Of the latter some specialised - as John Bartholomew, for instance, did in maps; whilst others preferred to retain the ability to respond to demand across a wider spectrum.

Whereas most firms produced to contracts from publishers, a few (notably Bartholomew, T. & A. Constable, and Thomas Nelson & Sons) were themselves publishers, thus achieving an important degree of vertical integration. The latter could specialise, rationalise, in pursuit of economies of scale internally. Thomas Nelson is the extreme case: employing nearly a thousand workers, their Parkside works routinely produced 30,000 volumes daily, and could double this in an emergency.<sup>59</sup> All were published by the firm. Much of the plant was designed by a specialist engineering staff, retained by the company; some of it was apparently unique and secret.<sup>60</sup> Of course, all the firms specialised to some extent, and some of those which worked largely to contract had relatively stable relationships with publishers.<sup>61</sup> But on the whole Edinburgh's printers 'rationalised' and installed new machinery more slowly than some of their rivals, notably in South East England; after the turn of the century Edinburgh's competitive advantage, largely gained through the employment of women compositors, was eroded for this reason.<sup>62</sup>

56. Gibson, 'Printing', 205-6.

57. Child, 158-9.

58. On the development of printing in Edinburgh, see Gibson, 178-84; Keir, 686-9.

59. Child, 160.

60. Oakley, 138.

61. J.S. Waterston, 'The Printing and Allied Trades of Edinburgh' in Scottish Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Commerce, 52.

62. Child, 160; Gibson, 201.



Edinburgh's importance in publishing was diminishing, in London's favour, of course; and this did not help the city's printing industry: at least one firm, the Ballantyre Press, moved from Edinburgh to London.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, by 1914 the new technology was quite widespread in the city: in comparison to engineering, it was easily introduced into printing. The reasons for this are important. The division of labour, particularly between compositors and machinemen (who operated the printing machines), and between them and bookbinders, warehousemen, and so on, was long-established. It was built into the lay-out of virtually every printing shop (even those for which 'design' is too strong a word).<sup>64</sup> The monotype and linotype did not dismember the compositor's task: rather, each could carry it out entirely.<sup>65</sup> Thus gains in productivity could be achieved without the wholesale re-organisation of the division of labour - new workshop layouts, incentive payment systems, tighter supervision - which was necessary in engineering.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the pre-war printing market was a growing one, not least because the new machinery allowed for the production of cheap books for a new mass market.<sup>67</sup>

#### 6.5 Printing: craft control in war and peace

The war did not have the profound effect on printing that it had on much of engineering: the trade was in part a 'luxury' one, and paper supplies were uncertain. Nevertheless, with recruitment into the armed forces and transfer of labour to munitions industries proceeding

63. In 1915: *ibid*, 183.

64. Southward, I, 1-42.

65. In contrast to previous typesetting machines, which had been unable to overcome important elements of the job, e.g., 'distribution': *cp* Child, 155-7.

66. Zeitlin, 268.

67. Child, 159.

apace (often with employers' encouragement),<sup>68</sup> from 1916 there was a labour shortage, and dilution threatened.<sup>69</sup> The print unions did not resist the latter, although they attempted to regulate it: mobility between jobs within firms, and mobility between firms, were increased, and overtime restrictions and machine-manning quotas relaxed.<sup>70</sup> The effective condition for this was substantial wage increases. By the end of the war the 'stab' (or piece) rate in Edinburgh had risen to 66s (31s in 1914), and the rate for mechanical composition to 68s6d (38s6d in 1914).<sup>71</sup> Perhaps because women were already common in Edinburgh's printing offices, dilution does not seem to have had a major disruptive effect. Few women compositors, for instance, were taken on during the war: all were paid the full male rate, and all were rapidly replaced after the war.<sup>72</sup>

During the post-war boom employers were willing to concede in the confidence that demand and prices would continue to strengthen. In 1919 and 1920 four increases were obtained, taking compositors' wages to the apex of the 'wage league'. Other wages in the industry followed them.<sup>73</sup> Although these were, since 1917, negotiated nationally, successes were also gained in Edinburgh. Most importantly, the

68. Child, 220.

69. S.C.Gillespie, A Hundred Years of Progress. The Record of the Scottish Typographical Association 1853 to 1952 (Glasgow 1953) 141-2; Child, 220-26.

70. Child, 221-2; Gillespie, 157.

71. Ibid.; cp also ch.4 above

72. Ibid., 206-7. Women had been introduced into skilled parts of the industry to break the 1872-73 Edinburgh printer's strike. At the 1911 census, 1796 out of 5259 'printers' were women. In 1910, however, apparently with the women's support, the STA negotiated, after a strike, an agreement with the employers that no women would be apprenticed as compositors after 1916. This agreement seems to have held: 'dilution' was only a temporary reversal of it. See Gillespie, 105, 203-7; Zeitlin, 270.

73. Child, 223-4; Gillespie, 158; ch.4 above.



long-standing local grievance of the so-called 'mixed system' (by which earnings consisted of both piece-and time-work elements) was abolished by eliminating piece-work.<sup>74</sup> At the same time the major post-war problem began to emerge: a contraction in the staple book trade, which created some problems in the reabsorption of demobilised union workers.<sup>75</sup> And union attempts to organise the Edinburgh daily press - non-union since 1872 - were rebuffed.<sup>76</sup>

As the economy moved into recession, so too did printing. The years from 1920 to 1923 were 'ones of heavy unemployment and considerable short-time working,' although conditions began to improve from 1924 onward.<sup>77</sup> The decline of the book sector - particularly quality books - meant that Edinburgh continued to suffer more than the national average for the industry. Where employment in Scottish printing as a whole rose by 19 per cent between 1921 and 1931, the bulk of this was in newspapers and periodicals: in Edinburgh the total workforce fell by 5 per cent, although the number employed in newspapers and periodicals actually rose by some 50 per cent.<sup>78</sup> Yet the industry, even in Edinburgh, was less hard-hit than many. Throughout the inter-war period unemployment in printing, publishing and bookbinding, was about a half the average for all industries nationally; and this seems also to have been true of Edinburgh.<sup>79</sup>

The peculiarities of Edinburgh printing were not great enough to make its industrial politics significantly different from those of the industry elsewhere. Jonathan Zeitlin sums the position up thus:

- 74. Gillespie, 72-6, 153, 163: although simple, this achievement had eluded the unions for over 50 years.
- 75. Gillespie, 142.
- 76. One tactic employed successfully by The Scotsman's management was to introduce a superannuation scheme for non-unionists only. It had the desired effect: TC EC minutes, 4 February 1919. Cp also Gillespie, 222.
- 77. Ibid., 142.
- 78. Gibson, 184-5; Census 1921; Gillespie, 143. 'Printing' here includes publishing and bookbinding. Oakley, Scottish Industry Today, 137, misquotes the 19 per cent figure to make it apply to Edinburgh: he thus concludes the position in the city to be 'satisfactory', despite other indicators to the contrary.
- 79. Child, 234-5; Gibson, 188.

by the 1920s,

printers had become clearly the best-paid manual workers of the period. The typographical unions throughout the country had secured complete control over the new composing machines - linotypes and monotypes - at substantial advances over hand rates. At the same time, they obtained official recognition from employers for restrictions on the number of apprentices, paving the way for the monopoly of labour supply that underlies their power on Fleet Street today. 80

In Edinburgh, the basis of this position had been achieved by the strike of 1909-10 on the question of female labour (and, more centrally perhaps, control of entry into apprenticeships), and by the lock-out of 1913, as a result of which employers accepted the principle of mutuality: that no working rules would be instituted without the agreement of the union.<sup>81</sup> Compositors secured control of composing machines, and although some ancillary workers were recruited, these were brought into the union - as, for example, monotype casters were admitted into the STA in 1918.<sup>82</sup> The role of the unions in the post-war period was largely the policing of these agreements: there was no major attempt by the employers to alter their terms.

This strong element of craft control, now but rarely based on skill, was associated with a peculiar management of work within the printing offices. Thus Carter Goodrich:

The compositors do not choose their own foremen, but the 'father of the chapel,' their shop steward, performs enough supervisory functions for the firm so that he is in effect an elected sub-foreman; and the 'clicker' chosen by a 'companionship' or team of compositors to do their bargaining with the firm and to allot piecework might also be thought of as an elected supervisor .... 83

80. Zeitlin, 264.

81. Gillespie, 217-8.

82. Ibid, 202.

83. Goodrich, 118-9.



In the 1936 edition of Southward's Modern Printing, a standard handbook, the duties of the clicker are enumerated, and the supervisory element is clear:

1. To receive copy from the overseer, and with it full instructions as to the style of the work to be done ....:
2. To give out copy in portions to the compositors working under him, and to provide them with directions as to style.
3. To keep an account of the copy given to each man.
4. To superintend the making up of the work.
5. To book each man's work, wages, etc., in a ledger.
6. To produce a general bill, showing to the firm the exact total cost at which the work is produced. <sup>84</sup>

Southward points out that this system saves the employer 'much time', ... [and] also tends to securing uniformity in the style of the work'.<sup>85</sup> Yet more than this, as Goodrich recognised, it amounted 'in effect to a democratic form of sub-contract;' mistakenly, however, he saw it as an historical relic, not to be found in 'modernised industry'.<sup>86</sup> For it clearly was a rational form of managing workers given the reality of the strength of certain groups; and the impossibility in practice of achieving sufficient unity among employers to break union regulation. It was also - albeit accidentally - a method of harnessing workers to the objectives of the enterprise through delegating substantial autonomy to officially-sanctioned work groups with strongly-imbued craft standards. In this way management might hope to minimise the development of dysfunctional group institutions, which tend to develop when management attempts highly individualised control methods.<sup>87</sup> It was, in short, a strategy of 'responsible autonomy', but one which in content rested heavily on the traditional structures of work organisation in the industry.

84. Southward, II, 302.

85. Ibid.

86. Goodrich, 120. The origins of companionships and clickers are discussed by Child, 42-3.

87. Cp D. Roy, 'Efficiency and "the fix": informal intergroup relations in a piecework machine shop', in Burns, Industrial Man, 359-79; Roy, 'Quota restriction and goldbricking in a machine shop', Amer. J. Sociol 57, 1952, 427-42.

Certainly (save in the newspaper sector) employers do not seem to have been unhappy with the unions' role in the industry. Edinburgh's employers' dissatisfaction about wages seems to have concerned relativities between towns within the industry, rather than their overall high level. But

they seemed on the whole to consider that a high degree of union organisation made their task easier in some ways than if they had to deal with unorganised workers: the unions, for example, were co-operating to secure a good type of apprentice and to supervise his training; and, again, employers who needed men could get the kind of worker they wanted through the union, which knew its members and their suitability for particular jobs to a degree which an employment exchange could never do. 88

The unions, then, gained substantial control over work organisation in the industry; but with this went the clear understanding that they would operate within bounds acceptable to employers. To this extent, Goodrich is clearly correct in categorising it as 'craft', rather than 'contagious', control.<sup>89</sup>

#### 6.6 The rubber industry: technology and control

Edinburgh's rubber industry was quite different from engineering and printing. It was of much more recent origin, having been established only since the 1850s, and thus lacked their long traditions. It was far more concentrated: one firm, the North British Rubber Company - the largest in any industry in the east of Scotland - employed three-quarters of the city's rubber workers at its Castle Mills.<sup>90</sup> This was by far the largest single factory in the city, and had, from its inception, operated a relatively complex internal division

88. Gibson, 197.

89. Goodrich, 260-65.

90. So called because originally built as a silk-mill. The story of the company's establishment is to be found in Oakley, 135; Milnes, 242-4; Keir, 637-8; G.A. Findlay, 'Rubber Manufacture in Edinburgh,' in Scottish Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Commerce, 60. On concentration in the industry, cp Milnes, 117, 242.



of labour; although clearly there had been changes, the essential methods established at the company's inception were still in use in the 1930s.<sup>91</sup>

In contrast to both engineering and printing, the rubber industry was highly vertically integrated. The North British carried out the manufacturing process from processing the raw material to wholesaling an array of finished articles: roughly equivalent to a single firm not only making a variety of papers, but also making books, stationery, and so forth, with them. Consequently, it was necessary to co-ordinate a great variety of different production processes. On the one hand, the raw rubber had to be purified, and then mixed with sulphur and pigments to form a plastic 'dough':

The dough is then passed through various machines for running it into sheet, tubing, or cord, from which are built up the articles it is desired to manufacture. A large portion of these articles have to be subsequently moulded. The manufactured article is then subjected to heat for a length of time, which causes the sulphur to combine chemically with the rubber, producing a state of vulcanisation. 92

During this period, however, limitations in rubber and moulding technology required many rubber products to be strengthened with textile fabrics:<sup>93</sup> this was achieved by softening the dough with a solvent, generally naphtha, and then forcing it onto the fabric by passing it through rollers.<sup>94</sup> Much of the machinery used in these processes was 'of an elaborate, heavy, and frequently dangerous type ... , and although some of the work consists mainly in machine-minding, much of it calls for a high degree of skill.'<sup>95</sup>

Whilst some materials, such as floor coverings, might be complete at this stage, many required assembly and finishing in separate

91. Oakley, 135.

92. 'British Empire Industries: Rubber' in Whitaker's Almanack 1920 840.

93. E.g., the moulded hot-water bottle was only beginning to be introduced in the 'twenties, and the fabric bottle was still held to be superior in giving 'a much longer life': Findlay, 60.

94. Whitaker's Almanack, 1920, 840.

95. Milnes, 249.

departments. Here a variety of other skills was called for, some involving the operation of light machinery (as sewing the cloth uppers onto plimsolls, or piercing eyelets), but probably the majority being entirely hand-work. Of course, the skills required were rarely of a high level; no apprenticeship was involved, and although some workers completed, for instance, entire garments, many of the tasks were intensely sub-divided and simplified.<sup>96</sup> This meant that management required substantial control over the production process: listing just some of the products gives an impression of the extent of the co-ordination and organisation necessary. Not only were various types of boots and shoes made, but so also were waterproof coats, hot water bottles, golf balls, bicycle and motor-car tyres, floats for fishing nets, and a whole variety of components for the car industry....<sup>97</sup>

Far more than in engineering or printing, management in the rubber industry retained control of the production process. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the process was very much the employers' creation: it was not constructed in dialogue with a body of craft knowledge. Secondly, the Company ensured that its superiority of knowledge about the design of the production processes was retained. Its size enabled it to sustain substantial managerial and technological staffs - nearly a hundred of the company's clerks joined the union in 1919 - who were responsible for a number of advances in product design.<sup>98</sup> Thirdly, the company went to remarkable lengths to ensure control over recruitment. It maintained its own employment exchange: mainly, recruitment was of boys and girls aged 14. All applicants were interviewed, and all those successful were subject to medical examination. Those with records of union activity might be refused employment.<sup>99</sup> Among women, at least, preference was given to those from areas of high unemployment around Edinburgh: New Craighall, Musselburgh, Leith and Broxburn. Indeed, special 'buses were operated

96. Ibid, 250; Findlay, 60.

97. Milnes, 249-50; Oakley, 136-7.

98. NUC Edin. branch minutes, 21 April, 5 May 1919; Oakley 136-7.

99. Cp NAUL No. 292 branch minutes 29 Jan., 5 Feb. 1918; 25 March 1920.



for them. Women were expected to leave on marriage, but would then form part of a reserve labour force, to be taken on as seasonal workers (much of the work was seasonal: most obviously, golf balls and hot water bottles).<sup>100</sup> Finally, there seems to have been a careful planning of the internal labour market. There were clear distinctions between male and female jobs, with the men employed largely in the earlier stages of the process, and the women in assembly and finishing:<sup>101</sup> there is some evidence that management exploited potential and actual conflict between men and women in order to weaken (or, at least, control) union organisation. It was certainly the view of a Labour Standard writer in 1925 that

The women did not object to being sweated and used as a lever to keep down the wages of the men. 102

Time rates and piecework were both used; despite a widespread dislike for the latter, union efforts to remove them were unsuccessful, perhaps because they offered the chance to earn up to 25 per cent more than time rates.<sup>103</sup> Of course, this does not imply that managerial control was in no way challenged; nor that the 'frontier of control' remained stationary throughout our period. On the contrary.

#### 6.7 The Castle Mills in war and peace

The rubber industry was at the centre of the war effort; Whitaker's Almanack for 1920 recorded:

The war absorbed an enormous quantity of rubber in the manufacture of aeroplanes (Palmer tyres of 1500 m/m x 300 m/m were fitted to Handley-Page Bombing

100. Milnes, 250-2; NAUL No. 292 branch minutes 29 January, 5 February 1918; cp also 25 February, 17 June 1920.
101. Milnes, 249-50.
102. Labour Standard 13 June 1925: 'Rubber and Politics: North British Rubber Company Thrives on Sweated Workers'. It should be said that the article had some harsh comments about the male workers' allegedly docile attitude. Cp also Milnes, 252-3.
103. TC ARs esp. 1923 and 1924; a Rubber Workers' union branch quarterly meeting, at which the majority of those present were pieceworkers, carried unanimously a demand for a 44 hour week, the abolition of piecework and overtime. They achieved only a 47 hour week: NAUL No.292 branch minutes, 12Jan, 23Feb. 1919.

Machines), submarines, surgical appliances, anti-gas apparatus, field telephone cables, rubber boots, waterproof coats and sheets, and tyres for motor ambulances, motor cars, motor vans, and lorries of every description. 104

As one of the largest rubber works in the country, the Castle Mills fell under the aegis of the Munitions of War Acts, which brought the apparatus of state intervention : compulsory arbitration; regulations on hours of work, work discipline, attendance standards; liability to inspection by Ministry personnel, including the welfare inspectorate.<sup>105</sup> Strikes were outlawed; dilution encouraged, new products demanded (and the production of others intensified or discontinued). Nevertheless, it is likely that the major impact was in the pressure of work and the involvement of statutory institutions, rather than in production methods and work organisation: here the essential systems had been long set.

Rubber-making had always been a dangerous business. Apart from dangerous machinery, many of the chemicals were dangerous: some were also addictive.<sup>106</sup> The industry probably became more dangerous during the war; certainly many complaints arose from workers at the Castle Mills. Over one month, for instance, in the winter of 1917-18, three issues of health and safety were reported to consecutive union committee meetings. Firstly, there was concern about 'replacing dressing for burns in solvent' <sup>107</sup> (not, interestingly, about the burns or the solvent themselves). Second, 'The case of men suffering from lead poisoning was again raised;' the strategy selected was to ask 'the NB Co to insure these men specially'.<sup>108</sup> Finally, the problems

104. Whitaker's Almanack 1920, 840.

105. Cp N. Whiteside, 'Industrial welfare and labour regulation in Britain at the time of the First World War', Int. Rev. of Social History 25, 1980, 307-31; G.R. Rubin, 'The Origins of Industrial Tribunals', 149-64.

106. T. Oliver, 'Indiarubber: Dangers Incidental to the Use of Bisulphide of Carbon and Naphtha', in T. Oliver (ed), Dangerous Trades (London 1902), 470-74: Oliver was a member of several Home Office committees and closely associated with the Factory Inspectorate. For a more modern assessment, including several hazards of which Oliver was unaware, cp Kinnersly, esp. 129-30, 347, 367.

107. NAUL No.292 branch minutes 13 December 1917.

108. Ibid., 27 December 1917: my emphasis.



of solvents recurred: two deaths were reported, 'and a discussion as to the cause of death and [what was seen as] the epidemic of disease in the solvent followed.'<sup>109</sup>

The involvement of statutory bodies and regulations in the organisation of production was a clear departure from pre-war practice. It is generally held that one intention of the Munitions of War Acts was to weaken union organisation; and they clearly were used to attack strong union organisation, as on Clydeside.<sup>110</sup> However, it is likely that, where union organisation was weak or non-existent, the effect of the Acts was to lend recognition and legitimation, de facto, to trade unions; or to hinder the development of a sharp employers' response to the early stages of union development. (The object, after all, was to maximise production: provoking a dispute on issues such as recognition or union existence can hardly have seemed justifiable to the Ministry's officials.) Such a contention is consistent with the formation of union organisation at Castle Mills.<sup>111</sup> The management had successfully prevented the formation of an active or lasting union presence for the previous sixty years; nor did it suddenly become an advocate of union membership. In April and May 1917 a campaign by the organiser of the NAUL led to the establishment of a committee and a series of mass meetings: some indication of the rapidity with which success was achieved is

109. Ibid., 10 January 1918.

110. Cp Rubin, Esp. 152-3, A.Marwick, The Deluge, British Society and the First World War (Harmondsworth 1967), 58-65; J.Hinton 'The Clyde Workers' Committee and the dilution struggle' in Briggs and Saville, Essays in Labour History, 152-84, esp.161.

111. And also, of course, with the massive increase in union membership occurring during the war: this, and its distribution by industry, is examined in B.C.Roberts, Trade Union Government and Administration in Great Britain (London 1956), 471-84. For a modern discussion of the importance of recognition to union organisation, see E.Batstone, I.Boraston and S.Frenkel, Shop Stewards in Action (London 1977), esp. ch.7, 259. There are other examples of the Ministry of Munitions pressing employers to recognise union institutions against their wishes, e.g., at Coventry, to recognise shop stewards' committees so as to facilitate dilution: Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement 224-5; Middlemas, Politics in Industrial Society, .8.

to be seen in the fact that on 21 May four branch officers were kept busy for  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours entering members and receiving cash.<sup>112</sup> Membership did not reach 100 per cent, although it may have done so in certain departments, but the cases of members refusing to work alongside non-members suggest that the latter were in a minority.<sup>113</sup>

The significance of the Ministry of Munitions was that it provided a mechanism for raising issues, a substitute in this sense for agreed procedures. Where previously the distance between organising in a union and achieving anything by this was considerable (in terms of dismissals, disputes, lost time, and so on) - now, suddenly, it was reduced. An achievable end was in view; and the role of the Ministry could, in part, be seen as a neutral one. Within weeks of its establishment, the union took up the case of three men who had been 'forced to sign an agreement accepting a lower rate than the minimum rate.'<sup>114</sup> The Ministry's representative confirmed that the company's action was wrong.<sup>115</sup> Later in the same year a strike occurred, which seems to have led to proceedings at a Munitions Tribunal, thus 'compelling Coy to negotiate'.<sup>116</sup>

The existence of a union at the Castle Mills meant that after the war, and more particularly after 1920, management could no longer rule in the same old way. In early 1919 the union went on the offensive, demanding a 44 hour week, and the abolition of piecework and overtime. They won a 47 hour week, in place of the previous 55

- 112. The formation of the NAUL No.292 branch is described in the minutes for April and May 1917; the first figures on membership are to be found in the minutes of 14 August 1917 when a ballot for secretary was held: 2118 votes were cast (although by then members from two small rubber works were also included).
- 113. Cp NAUL No.292 branch minutes 3, 5, 19 February, 8 August 1918, 16 January 1919.
- 114. NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 28 June 1917.
- 115. But headed 'that the amount at issue being so small, the matter was not worth proceeding with'. Ibid., 2 August 1917.
- 116. Ibid., 23 August 1917; cp also 14 August 1917.



(no mean achievement)<sup>117</sup> and substantial advances in pay, though piece-work and overtime were not abolished.<sup>118</sup> By mid-1920 the union branch numbered about 3900, and cannot have been far from 100 per cent membership in the industry in Edinburgh.<sup>119</sup> A Whitley Council was set up, with joint works committees in the various plants, a district structure to which disputes would be referred failing internal agreement, and a national industrial council: the union saw this as a major advance.<sup>120</sup> But, ultimately, employers' control was not in question.

Although the detail is obscure, after 1920 union strength was eroded, until by the 1930s, it was largely dependent upon managerial support.<sup>121</sup> During the War the Company conceded the union presence reluctantly, defended - even aggressively - its right to employ non-union labour, used the latter against the union, and in no way discouraged inter-union competition for recruits.<sup>122</sup> After the war, redundancies soon began, with little union resistance.<sup>123</sup> Management's control of the internal labour market led to the transfer of nearly a

117. Ibid., 12 January, 23 February 1919.

118. See Ch.4; TC AR 1920, 42; by May 1919, pieceworkers were complaining at how their earnings had been cut with the shorter week: NAUL No.292 branch minutes, 8 May 1919.

119. This estimate is derived from the assertion, *ibid.* 15 July 1920, that affiliation to the TC on full membership 'would mean an affiliation fee of approximately £65'; TC fees in 1920 were 4d per member p.a.: TC AR 1920, 55; for 1923 Milnes estimates the number employed in the industry at 4233: Milnes 244; the 1921 Census records 3903 'workers in Rubber, Vulcanite, Ebonite', excluding employers, managers, foremen and overlookers.

120. NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 8 August 1918, 10 January 1919.

121. Milnes, 252-3.

122. Cp, e.g., NAUL No.292 branch minutes, 3, 5 February 1918; 12 June 17 August 1918; 21 August 1919.

123. Ibid., 3 July 1919.

hundred clerks from the NAUL to the National Union of Clerks;<sup>124</sup> and attempts to establish a joint union committee including craft unions proved abortive.<sup>125</sup> Given an apparent tension between men and women, and a number of structural disincentives to union membership among the latter (high turnover, retirement on marriage, distinct socio-geographical origins), the increasing proportion of females in the industry's labour force must have been, at least incidentally, a strategy to weaken the union.<sup>126</sup> The decision to maintain a Welfare Department, particularly to deal with women, may also be seen in this light.<sup>127</sup> Certainly, the union began to suffer some setbacks. During 1922 or 1923 time and piece rates were reduced by between 21 and 32 per cent, and an hour was added to the working week.<sup>128</sup> Work was speeded-up, and a number of disputes occurred: by 1925 union membership had fallen to 25 per cent, and no doubt suffered more after the General Strike.<sup>129</sup>

In short, the scale and technology of the rubber industry, especially in the Castle Mills, made direct control both possible and desirable. During the war, however, as union organisation developed,

124. Ibid., 21 August, 4 September 1919; cp NUC Edinburgh branch minutes, 6 January, 17 March, 21 April, 5 May 1919.

125. NAUL No 292 branch minutes, 27 November 1919.

126. Cp ibid., 15 May 1917; Milnes 252-3. The numbers effectively employed in the rubber industry were:

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Females(%)</u>
1923	4233	50.2
1924	4584	49.3
1925	4682	50.6
1926	4827	50.7
1927	4356	50.0
1928	4480	52.9

Source: Milnes, 244.

127. Milnes, 251.

128. TC AR 1922, 1923.

129. Labour Standard 13 June 1925: 'North British Rubber Company thrives on Sweated Workers'; Douglas, Zero Hour for the Forth 12.



management appears to have edged toward an element of 'responsible autonomy': but in a form very different from that found in printing. For whilst close supervision persisted in the work process itself, some recognition was given to trade union organisation. Probably, however, this openness to a union role was induced by government involvement, for after the war the Company made a determined, and largely successful, attempt to weaken union organisation. Interestingly, however, this itself seems to have brought costs: a number of sectional strikes occurred, which were difficult to settle, and so the Company took steps to strengthen union membership.<sup>130</sup> For, as Milnes recorded after discussion with the Company,

In the absence of a recognised union when disputes arise, the firm is compelled to carry on negotiations with a specially elected workers' committee and discussions with such a committee are frequently futile, since agreements made with them are generally impossible to enforce. 131

#### 6.8 The railways: structure and service

Although Edinburgh was far more than a railway town, the railways were more important to her economy than to the economies of most towns, even in the 1920s. Over four per cent of the city's workforce<sup>132</sup> was employed in the service of the North British and Caledonian Railway companies.<sup>133</sup> Leith's trade was highly dependent on the ability of the railways to transport its imports and exports; not least coal. The proximity of the railway was an important factor in the location of industry in the town.<sup>134</sup>

130. Milnes, 252

131. Ibid.

132. Census, 1921.

133. As a result of the Railways Act 1921, these became part respectively, of the London North Eastern and London, Midland and Scottish railways (LNER and LMS).

134. Cp, e.g., Oakley, 132.

The railway companies were massive. The two which ran into and out of Edinburgh were, by a large margin, the largest industrial companies in Scotland. Each had well over twice the share capital of the third largest company: together, they had a share capital larger than the total share capital of the next eighteen largest companies.<sup>135</sup> They were vast employers of labour, not merely in operating trains - which had to be as nearly around-the-clock as possible - but in loading and unloading freight, building and repairing rolling-stock, and maintaining track, stations, and other fixed capital. In Edinburgh alone, in 1921, they employed over 8,000 men and women<sup>136</sup> in a variety of roles: as drivers, firemen, guards, porters, clearly; but also as clerks, signalmen, permanent way men (maintaining track), and in the railway workshops in the entire spectrum of the engineering trades.

Some of these tasks were relatively capital-intensive: for instance, each engine crew operated in a machine of great complexity, as did signalmen. Their movements were prescribed in detail by timetables, although, of course, keeping safely to these timetables was a matter of great skill and responsibility. On the other hand, track maintenance was highly labour-intensive, requiring gangs of men to work, often with little more than hand-tools, and often many miles from their home towns. Railway engineering workshops had many of the characteristics of heavy engineering. Each<sup>company</sup> had developed a large central administrative organisation, which planned the operational aspects of railway work: timetabling in particular, but of repairs, maintenance, as well as of trains themselves. And each was marked by an internal division of labour of bewildering complexity.

A military model was fundamental to the organisation of work in the railway industry before and after the Great War. Partly this was because it was one of the few known methods of large-scale organisation when the railways were established.<sup>137</sup> But, in addition, the railways

135. Scott and Hughes, The Anatomy of Scottish Capital, 67-8, 109: the figures relate to 1920-21.

136. 1921 Census.

137. On this, see Burns and Stalker, 104-5.



had to co-ordinate a network of employees (often, initially, from rural backgrounds) in widely varying jobs over vast areas. Basic work-disciplines had to be instilled, basic standards set: a process very similar to mobilising an army. It was necessary to instil not merely a sense of organisational goals, but also a common appreciation of their paramount importance. Not just the structural, but also the moral, elements of the military model were taken over.

When men joined the railway they entered the 'Service'. They worked for a company and wore the uniform and livery of that company. The officials of the company were termed 'officers' and 'superior officers'. Trains carrying such personnel were termed 'officers specials'. A man did not go to work; he went on 'duty'. His position was a 'post', and when he left that 'post' he was 'relieved'. If he failed to report for duty, or left his post without permission, he was 'Absent without Leave'. If he offended against company rules (for instance by smoking on the footplate) he was put on a 'charge' and subject to a fine, to suspension from duty, or to loss of rank. No appeal was allowed. A railway man worked to a roster or a rota. He was obliged to obey without dissent, those persons appointed 'above' him. 'Service', punctilio, and absolute obedience to rule were drilled into him. 138

The success of this strategy during the nineteenth century was remarkable: the attitudes of the 'Service' were very largely internalised by the railway servants and, in time, those joining knew what to expect. And there was another side to the military approach: if hours were long and pay was low, loyalty was rewarded by a security of employment almost unmatched in nineteenth century industry. 139

Nevertheless, in time railway servants rebelled against 'all the petty tyranny'.<sup>140</sup> In doing so, however, they were hindered by another

138. F.McKenna, 'Victorian Railway Workers', History Workshop Journal 1, 1976, 27-8.

139. Ibid., 26-37.

140. The phrase in J.H.Thomas's, quoted in P.S.Bagwell, The Railwaymen. The History of the National Union of Railwaymen (London 1963), 299.

aspect of the military model: for in the railway service the division of labour became a fetish. There were (literally) hundreds of distinct job classifications and grades, and, in the army mode, workers were commonly addressed and referred to by job title as well as name. This was reinforced in everyday social interaction: drivers and firemen, for instance, working together in the same cab, would very likely drink in different bars and stay at different hostels.<sup>141</sup> The sense of 'the service', the intensity and social meaning of the division of labour, the strictness of company discipline, made the development of united union organisation between grades difficult. Also, the companies were inclined to perceive union organisation (and, even more, strikes) as incipiently mutinous. It was, therefore, not until the decisive national strike of 1911 that the unions even achieved recognition from management;<sup>142</sup> and only in the wake of this was the National Union of Railwaymen formed, by amalgamation of several smaller unions.<sup>143</sup>

#### 6.9 The service in war and peace

When war broke out, the railway companies were placed under State control. A Railway Executive Committee was appointed, consisting of leading railway general managers, to operate the railways in the interest of the war effort. Railway company revenues were guaranteed at (record) 1913 levels. (There was no mention of workers' wages or living standards.)<sup>144</sup> At the same time, many railway workers left to join the forces, and the service became understaffed; new sources of labour were found, particularly among women, but the main solution

141. McKenna, 42-8; Bagwell, 417.

142. On the 1911 strike, see McKenna, 54-65; Bagwell, 289-308; N. McKillop, The Lighted Flame. A History of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers & Firemen (London 1950), 88-98.

143. Bagwell, 325-43.

144. Ibid., 346-7.



was to lengthen working hours and increase the workload of railwaymen.<sup>145</sup> For the railways bore the brunt of internal transport demands; these were particularly great in Scotland with the Grand Fleet based at Scapa Flow, and important elements of it using other anchorages at Invergordon, in the Forth, and on the west coast.<sup>146</sup> So the war had a positive effect on the bargaining strength of the NUR. As the Edinburgh No. 1 branch recalled,

with the international war, the wage war did not stop. The cost of living rose tremendously, and demands had to be made for increased wages. <sup>147</sup>

These were conceded in part (though only in the form of flat rate 'war bonuses'); but the important change from 1915, was that they were agreed, nationally: company negotiations on wages were never revived.<sup>148</sup>

The 'truce' which the railway union leaders and the railway managers agreed in October 1914 lasted through the war. The centralisation of negotiations was, of course, related to this, for the Railway Executive could be more confident of agreement with national leaders, who were strongly associated with the national war effort: the General Secretary of the NUR, J.H. Thomas, for instance, was invited to join the Cabinet in 1917, an offer he declined at least in part because he was hoping for an invitation to join the War Cabinet; in 1918 he became a Privy Councillor.<sup>149</sup> But this 'truce' did not bring an end to industrial conflict. The experience of the NUR, in particular, for several years before 1914 had led to the development of a militant element within its membership which drew inspiration and theory from syndicalists and socialists.<sup>150</sup> In Edinburgh during 1911 and 1912 the No. 1 branch of the NUR became increasingly militant, and

145. Ibid., 345.

146. Lenman, Economic History, 209.

147. NUR Edinburgh No. 1 branch, Jubilee Souvenir 1876-1926, (Edin. 1926), 26.

148. Ibid. ; Bagwell, 348-9.

149. Bagwell, 351-2.

150. Holton, British Syndicalism, esp. 97-9, 164-7.

critical of its national leadership.<sup>151</sup> Whilst some aspects of the wartime experience weakened this movement (not least the blandishments of patriotism), the rising cost of living, especially when compared with the comfortable situation of shareholders, lent strength to demands for higher wages. A tension therefore developed between the leading officials of the union, and many of its active members: this was reflected in the increasing influence of District Councils and Vigilance Committees, and in the problems which Thomas encountered in resisting a strike in November 1917.<sup>152</sup>

Given the nature of their highly mechanistic organisational structures, dilution brought problems on the railways. The grade and classification structure was the foundation of an intricate system of status differences; and in peacetime an individual's progression through them was slow. During the war it was accelerated: thus the social meanings attached to the various jobs, or work-roles, were severely dislocated. Very often the short-term response was a vigorous defence of existing standards. A revealing instance arose in Edinburgh in May 1918, when the North British proposed to introduce women passenger guards. A special meeting of passenger guards appointed a deputation to 'state the [ir] objection' to the district superintendant: the union branch, covering all grades, shared the guards' view, rejecting an addendum to the effect

That this meeting impresses upon the deputation of passenger guards the advisability of placing no obstacle in the way of women becoming passenger

151. Ibid., 108-9; cp NUR Edin. No 1 branch, Souvenir, 23: 'About this time the socialist activity of certain members is worthy of notice as giving point to the discussion and interest to the meetings which had a good effect on the members'. In Dec. 1913, James Larkin addressed 7,000 supporters in Edinburgh; 'The platform was stormed by sympathisers eager to shake Mr. Larkin by the hand': Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury, 12 Dec. 1913, quoted Holton, 196.

152. Bagwell, esp. 352-5.



guards but will press for the best conditions being obtained for those who may be introduced. 153

In the long run, however, the meaning-system was inevitably undermined. This did not imply the imminent collapse of the industry's division of labour (although there were several steps just after the war to simplify and standardise the classification and grading systems).<sup>154</sup> It did, however, still further weaken the effectiveness of 'railway values' in sustaining work disciplines; and this was to create further problems for railway management after the war.

Three factors are crucial to understanding the post-war development of the railways: the enormous achievements of the unions in 1919 (and to a lesser extent, 1920); the deteriorating market environment; and the changing relationship between the industry and the state. Of 1919 much has been written. The eight-hour day was implemented in February, a landmark in the history of the industry (and particularly in the history of the ASLE&F.<sup>155</sup> The national rail strike in September was marked by great unity in action between trade unions ('The Associated [SLE&F], though having got a settlement, struck with us to a man');<sup>156</sup> by great membership support - although Edinburgh's claim 'All men and women out' should be qualified by the NUR No 1 branch's interest in 'the question of Blacklegs';<sup>157</sup> by the use of the press on both sides;<sup>158</sup> by the government's capitulation. It was, above all, a massive achievement

153. NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes 26 May 1918: the addendum was rejected by 11 votes to 2. There is a more optimistic view of dilution in G.D.H.Cole and R.Page Arnot, Trade Unionism on the Railways. Its History and problems (London 1917), 62-4.
154. See Bagwell, 417-8; McKillop, 136-8: the immediate cause of these was the need to harmonise various companies' grading structures on grouping.
155. Cp, esp., McKillop, ch.10, esp. 119-20.
156. NUR Edin. No 1, Souvenir, 28. The 1919 strike is most fully covered by Bagwell, ch. 15.
157. The claim was made in a telegram to Unity House, London, quoted Bagwell, 387. The question of blacklegs was discussed by the Edin. No.1 branch, NUR, on three occasions at least: it seems they were summoned to a special meeting, and the branch wished to see them expelled: Minutes, 12, 26 October, 9 November 1919.

of organisation and morale: at the No. 1 branch's meeting on 9 November, a song written as a 'souvenir of the Railway Strike' by a branch member was sung; printed, it sold well.<sup>159</sup> Although doubts were subsequently voiced at the detailed national agreement,<sup>160</sup> 1919 seemed to have shifted the balance of power in the industry away from the employers.

Under the shadow of this defeat, the employers had to contend with a deteriorating market situation. They were subject to intense competition. After the war, especially after the onset of depression, the shipping surplus brought down coasting rates: Leith's coastal trade remained relatively stable after the war, and rose after 1923.<sup>161</sup> Except where speed was essential, or the destination inland, shipping was highly competitive with the railways.<sup>162</sup> In local trading, road transport was an increasing problem (as chapter 3 suggested). In the 1919 rail strike, the lorry proved itself a potentially dangerous competitor, especially over short distances.<sup>163</sup> At the same time, the

159. NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes 9 November, 7 December 1919.

160. The No 1 branch, NUR, expressed 'its dissatisfaction with the Agreement and its inadequacy to meet our demands, while being forced to accept it': *ibid*, 18 January 1920, cp 28 March 1920; Bagwell, 416-7.

161. Milnes, 148, 155.

162. There were, of course, extra hazards in coastal transport. Keynes' Economic Consequences of the Peace, for instance, printed in 1919 by R. & R. Clark of Edinburgh for Macmillan, first came to the public's attention on the shores of Jutland. The ship carrying it was driven eastward by storms, and finally wrecked: 2000 copies were thrown overboard to lighten the load. See R. Harrod, The Life of John Maynard Keynes (Harmondsworth 1972), 339.

163. Interestingly, however, even in the mid-'twenties the General Secretary of the Scottish Horse and Motormen's Association (the carters' union) 'was not convinced that the motor vehicle would dominate the future' (A. Tuckett, The Scottish Carter (London 1967), 158): the horse was still of vital importance. On the lorry in 1919, cp Bagwell, 390.



recession reduced the total quantity of goods requiring transport, particularly on certain Scottish routes which had been heavily used in wartime.

The railway employers' responses to the new market situation, and the unprecedented self-confidence of the railway workers, were influenced by their relationship with the state. Government control lasted longer on the railways than in other industries. Not until August 1921 was state control surrendered, although as this date approached the personnel who exercised control on its behalf began to act in the interest of their companies, rather than of the state as such.<sup>164</sup> During the first two post-war years the government not only conceded on railway working conditions; it also prevaricated and vacillated on the question of control, first suggesting nationalisation but - having defused the issue until union strength had waned - finally returning the railways to the companies under the ineffectual aegis of a Ministry of Transport.<sup>165</sup> The Railways Act 1921 was an example of state intervention to restructure the private sector, since it did 'regroup' the railways into seven large companies (with effect from 1924). But

Parliament had ... rejected the idea of a co-ordinated transport system run primarily as a service .... In particular, the railways were to be run as commercial undertakings, whose first consideration was the production of a profit for those who had invested their money in the companies. 166

The railway companies thus returned in 1921 to full control of an industry which, for the previous seven years, had been operated with other (military and political) objectives to the fore. Union organisation now posed problems: there could be no return to the pre-1911 strategy of tight direct control of labour, ignoring unions. This had been accepted by the creation of various 'joint' institutions

164. Bagwell, 411, 419-21.

165. Ibid., esp. 404-14, for a full coverage of this subject, cp also Middlemas, Politics in Industrial Society, esp. 123-4, 149-51, 155-7.

166. Bagwell, 414.

during 1919-21, and by the 1921 Act. Yet the companies needed to increase their rate of return on capital and labour employed. They attempted to do so in two ways during the early 'twenties: by increasing the volume of traffic, and by reducing their expenditure on labour and capital. The first is easily dealt with: advertising campaigns, cheap day return and weekly season tickets, and similar promotional devices were inevitably inadequate in the competitive environment after 1921 (which, of course, is when companies began to attempt them in earnest).<sup>167</sup> So their major efforts went into the direct cutting of costs. In the Edinburgh area, a number of smaller stations and branch lines were closed in the early 'twenties;<sup>168</sup> the workshop at St. Margaret's was run down;<sup>169</sup> employment was reduced and greater efficiency demanded.<sup>170</sup>

Such moves required a reassertion of managerial control. But the effectiveness of the pre-war work structures, eroded during war-time, had been further weakened by the disputes over 'standardisation' which arose in the wake of the terms of settlement of the 1919 strike. The elaborate system of grades and classifications was vastly simplified; but all kinds of inconsistencies arose, and dissatisfaction was rife.

167. Hunter, Edinburgh's Transport, 162-3: all were tried in Edinburgh.

168. Ibid., 163-6.

169. NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes 10, 24 Aug., 7, 21 Sept., 19 Oct., 1924; Labour Standard, 17 October 1925, 2 January 1926. This 'rationalisation' was of course made possible by the grouping of railways: work was concentrated at Cowairs (Glasgow) and Inverurie.

170. Between 1921 and 1931 the number of railway employees in Edinburgh fell by 18.3 per cent, according to the censuses, from 8064 to 6586. The number of insured railway employees declined thus:

	<u>1923</u>	<u>1924</u>	<u>1925</u>	<u>1926</u>	<u>1927</u>	<u>1928</u>
Number:	2376	2500	2082	1845	2093	1932
Index:	100	105	88	78	88	81

Source: Milnes, 154, and calculation therefrom.



Speaker after speaker at an NUR branch meeting in March 1920 gave examples of the injustice of the new system. One will suffice: before the agreement, the grade 'Examiners' had been divided into four classes, 'Special', 'first', 'second', and 'third':

now they were only one class, and all paid alike - 66/- falling 56/-. Under him as examiner in Waverley [the speaker reported] he had tradesmen working - there were joiners, plumbers, who were simply refusing to accept the grading. 171

This elision of grades stirred emotions which the grade system had so effectively fostered; but it also demonstrated that the structure was not immutable. What remained, therefore, was an hierarchic structure based upon a system of rules backed up by disciplinary sanctions; but less effective in mobilising opinion, in sustaining a common moral culture within the workforce.

Moreover other aspects of the old notion of railway service were weakened by the financial policies of the railway companies after 1920. Cost-cutting policies brought an end to the 'job for life'.<sup>172</sup> Dismissals began in 1920: some were only temporary, but this only serves to emphasise the employers' new approach to labour.<sup>173</sup> At the same time, employment cuts were seen by the workers as an attack on the standard of the service. Threats to permanent way staff numbers, for instance, 'constitute[d] a grave menace to the travelling public';<sup>174</sup> whilst tightening up of working practices was held to have led to defective rolling stock, and thus accidents.<sup>175</sup>

The approach adopted by the railway companies in reasserting their control can be seen as a shift in the direction of a 'responsible

171. NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes 28 March 1920.

172. McKenna, 31-5.

173. For examples, see NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes, 4 July, 4, 15 August, 1920, 27 February, 8 May, 31 July, 4, 18 December 1921, 11 March 1923, 29 June, 21 September 1924. Cp also Bagwell, 419-20, and the assertion of the National Wages Board that 'in practice security of employment for the ordinary railway employee extends beyond the guaranteed week and, provided he is able to perform his work, he is practically immune from the vicissitudes of short time and unemployment'. (3 June 1920, quoted Bagwell, 419.)

174. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 29 June 1924.

175. Labour Standard 22 January 1927: a letter from 'Railway Worker.'

autonomy' strategy: though a very qualified shift. There is little question that discipline tightened after 1919. Signalmen were suffering 'severe punishments for technical offences';<sup>176</sup> a yard foreman exhibited 'Prussianism in its worst and [sic] malignant form'.<sup>177</sup> At the same time, piecework was introduced in certain jobs, particularly in the workshops.<sup>178</sup> The essence of the employers' strategy was to tighten control, intensify labour, in the everyday working of the railways; but to involve unions in the newly-instituted joint procedures and committees, thus reducing their ability to mobilise effectively. This had an effect both nationally and locally. At a national level, the leaders of the NUR regarded recognition accorded to the unions by the 1921 Act as their major achievement, even opposing a 1924 ASLE&F strike because it was in breach of procedure, and instructing NUR members to work normally.<sup>179</sup> Locally, the attitude was similar:

the National Wages Board and the Wages Board, with the Railway Boards, Sectional Councils, and Local Departmental Committees, [are] all [bodies] ... which when our railwaymen are wise enough to organise sufficiently may provide them with the machinery that would give them complete control of their industry. <sup>180</sup>

Union branches became involved in these bodies; representatives argued their members' cases, both individual and collective; some gained enviable reputations as advocates.<sup>181</sup>

In short, the railway employers' approach during the early 1920s attempted to integrate union organisation in a common conception, not so much of the aims of the railways, as of the values

- 176. NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes 23 April 1922: report of a letter from Edin. and District Signalmen's Committee.
- 177. Ibid., 22 October 1922; other examples are to be found in *ibid.*, 1 February, 14 March, 9 May 1920, 2 July 1922, 15 July 1923, 18 April 1926. Cp also Bagwell, 440-1.
- 178. Ibid., 13 July 1924.
- 179. Bagwell, 434-7.
- 180. NUR Edin. No 1 branch, Souvenir, 28.
- 181. An example is Nixon of the NUR No 1 Branch. He was requested by men from other departments (e.g. Minutes, 8 May 1921), objected to by management (*ibid.*), and offered promotion by the North British RC (*ibid.*, 23 May 1920).



of recognition and procedure.<sup>182</sup> The companies were fortunate (in this respect) that unemployment lessened many of their problems of motivation, for this integration of the unions could reduce the effectiveness of workers' resistance, but it could not motivate as effectively as the old notions of the railway service. The employers were successful to the extent that the unions perceived the joint institutions gained in 1921 as their fundamental achievements, the basis of their ability to represent their members effectively. The railway unions had turned, perhaps perforce, from defending their members to defending the joint machinery they had won.

Edinburgh's employers, then, adopted a variety of strategies in attempting to achieve the control over labour necessary to enable them to attain their objectives. These strategies varied according to a number of factors: the structure of the firm and the industry, their market environment, the strength of labour. But some general conclusions can be reached; certain trends are discernable. Firstly, 'scientific management' in a strong sense was rarely adopted. During the years of greatest labour strength, change was too frequent to encourage investment in the control systems necessary to make such techniques effective; and, moreover, it required the goodwill and abilities of various groups of workers. With the depression, employers did 'tighten-up' in a number of ways, but this did not amount to 'scientific management'; and in many cases this 'tightening-up' was allied with attempts to win workers' commitment to enterprise objectives (either directly<sup>or</sup> through enlisting unions' interest in common aims, such as stability). Secondly, the onset of depression did not encourage attempts to achieve economies of scale: on the contrary, 'tightening-up' was an attempt to achieve greater efficiencies with existing plant. Thirdly, although employers' control was never fundamentally in doubt, it was occasionally under severe pressure until 1920. Thereafter, the balance of industrial power shifted decisively against the unions: nevertheless, there are grounds for

182. On procedure as an element of 'responsible autonomy' strategies, cp Friedman, Industry and Labour, 96-8.

supposing that, in the late 'twenties, their position in Edinburgh was in general stronger than it had been before the war.

Union development thus occurred on shifting and differing terrains. Although influenced by factors such as industrial structure and management strategy, these were so variegated as to suggest that other factors were also necessary to produce the major shifts in union strength which marked our period. It is to those factors which grounded the general union advance of 1917-1920, and then the general retreat, that we now turn.



## Chapter 7

### Trade Union Development: Motivation and Organisation

#### 7.1 Union mobilisation

Although they are subject to many other influences, the essential framework within which unions develop is the conflict around the 'frontier of control'. On the terrain discussed in the last chapter, workers and managers recognise their interests, identify grievances, mobilise arguments. As we have seen, this terrain is not unchanging: economic, social or political events, even a substantial victory by one side in manoeuvre on a given landscape, may move future conflict onto entirely new (and more favourable) ground. The 1922 lock-out in engineering shifted future conflict onto terrain even more favourable to the employers; the 1919 railway strike did so to the unions' benefit (although probably it might have been more fully exploited): within a single workplace, the establishment of a union at the Castle Mills had a similar effect. And ground thus won may be eroded slowly, without any apparent defeat.

But although the terrain of industrial conflict normally gives an advantage, or initiative, to one side or another, it does not in any simple sense determine the outcome. It is, of course, possible for one side (management, say) to blunder, causing its defeat, even though the overall balance of power is in its favour. More importantly, however, industrial conflict involves the mobilisation of power resources by employers and workers: the success of either side therefore depends not only on the resources available to it (in relation to its opponent's resources), but also on its success in using them.

We suggested in chapter 2 that it can be helpful to examine the working class's ability to take collective political action in relation to the principles which motivate the action. In this section we attempt to specify the theory there presented in relation to trade unions.

There is now a substantial literature attesting to the generation by groups of workers of values and behavioural patterns which, if not oppositional, are at least dysfunctional from the viewpoint of the industrial concern for which they work. Much of this literature originated in criticism of, or in attempts to improve, management theories. Its implications are clear: there exist, even within those work situations which are very largely employer-defined, social institutions - often informal - which support values different from those which the employer would encourage. These institutions may develop an outlook on the economic objectives of work which involves a rationality at variance with the employers'. This may lead to various attempts to establish some collective control over payments systems.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand they may assert some entitlement to controlling the workers' immediate working environment: this may involve attempts to control the pace of work, or its distribution between members of the group, or the rights of management or other groups of workers.<sup>2</sup> These two dimensions may be consciously linked, as they appear to be in notions of an 'effort bargain' - a 'fair day's work for a fair day's pay'.<sup>3</sup> Such are principles deriving

1. Cp, e.g., Roy, 'Efficiency and "the fix"', 255-66; Roy, 'Quota restriction and goldbricking in a machine shop', 427-42.
2. Co, e.g., *ibid.*; Roy, 'Banana time: job satisfaction and informal interaction', Human Organisation 18, 1960, 158-68; H. Beynon, Working for Ford (Hardmonsworth 1973), esp. ch 6; Armstrong et al., Ideology and Shop-floor Industrial Relations, 116-9.
3. *Ibid.*, 113-6; cp H. Behrend, 'The effort bargain', Industrial and Labor Relations Review 10, 1957, 503-15; J. Saville, 'The ideology of labourism', in R. Benewick, R.N. Berki and B. Parekh (eds), Knowledge and Belief in politics. The problem of ideology (London 1973), esp. 215-17.



from workers' practical consciousness: they negotiate fundamental economic values, but always in relation to a specific and limited context; they spring not from an alternative rationality of general application, but from an interpretation of workers' <sup>own</sup> positions and interests in the language of 'theoretical consciousness'.

Secondly, however, dominant societal values are brought into the workplace in at least two ways. They are reflected in the ordinary discourse of workers, albeit in a 'fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential' form.<sup>4</sup> But, in a far more articulate and purposive way, they underlie the activity of management. Management's authority is buttressed by assumptions about the prerogatives of property; its relations with its employees exist within a legal framework - during our period, there was no equivocation about its being the law of 'Master and Servant';<sup>5</sup> its actions can generally be justified by reference to fundamental economic values.<sup>6</sup> Generally, too, the law constitutes a power-resource for management, rather than for workers.<sup>7</sup>

These various values and principles have an important role in mobilisation, of course. We should bear in mind that they are generated and sustained by institutions. Thus, for example, the legitimacy afforded to 'restrictive practices' may be rather greater where they are supported by long-established craft institutions and attitudes, than where their sole support is a group of semi-skilled workers on an assembly-line, many of whom have no union background.<sup>8</sup>

4. Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 419.
5. K.W.Wedderburn, The Worker and The Law (Harmondsworth 1971), esp. 52-3: it was, e.g., still the position that the servant 'contracted on the terms that as between himself and his master he would run this risk [of liability if he injured a fellow-worker]' (Baron Alderson, 1850, quoted Wedderburn, 264).
6. Armstrong, et al., 64-82, esp. 68-70.
7. Ibid., 64-5; Wedderburn, esp. 23-9.
8. Cp, e.g., Beynon, 177-8: this does not, of course, imply that semi-skilled assembly-line workers are unable to create institutions which legitimise restrictive practices.

For our purposes, it is useful to distinguish two types of institutions. There are, first, those which generate or sustain legitimising principles quite unconsciously, as perhaps the work-group which reallocates work among its members generates justifications for its actions. Second, other institutions are formed precisely to further certain objectives, and by implication the principles which legitimise these. Thus a trade union may be formed to press<sup>the</sup> interests of a group of workers; in attempting to do so, however, it may deploy arguments which draw on a far wider set of legitimising principles - including several from the managerial repertoire.

Bearing in mind that these types are not in reality discrete, we have two preliminary criteria by which to assess the political development of a workplace trade union organisation: these are whether and how the organisation deploys principles of legitimation; and the extent to which it develops institutions which aid it in the mobilisation of various kinds of resource. To take an example from industrial relations literature: shop stewards acting in isolation appear to be generally less effective than those who operate among a network of colleagues. This network is able to carry out many tasks more effectively (intelligence-gathering, processing and evaluating information, and so on); but it also allows an elite group to assess its relationship with its members in terms of a relatively distinct vocabulary of motives, and hence to consider methods of legitimising action for them which appears necessary to it.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter we examine the development and activity of trade union institutions, or organisation, in Edinburgh. We examine the factors which influenced this development and activity, especially the important legitimising principles; and we discuss some of the main characteristics of the organisations which were created.

9. Cp E. Batstone, I. Boraston, and S. Frenkel, Shop Stewards in Action (London 1977), esp. chs. 2, 3.



## 7.2 Mobilisation and advance, 1917 - 1918

The scale of union advance in Britain during and just after the Great War is a commonplace. The general view is expressed by Bain:

The First World War enormously enhanced the power and prestige of the trade union movement. Between 1913 and 1920 the number of trade unionists more than doubled giving the movement a total membership of over 8 million. 10

And while most obvious in the membership statistics, the advance is also reflected in other factors: increased state recognition, more widespread workplace organisation, the organisation of previously non-union groups of workers, the amalgamation and restructuring of a number of unions. But for our purposes it is necessary to move beyond these generalisations.

In fact, the growth in trade union membership during 1914 and 1915 was, if anything, slower than it had been during the preceding four years. As table 7.1 shows, it was not until 1916 that we can begin to speak of increases which were clearly war-related. Of course,

Table 7.1: Trade Union Membership 1910 - 1920

Year	<u>Total Union Membership</u> (thousands)	<u>Membership of TUC-affiliated unions:</u>		
		<u>Total</u> (thousands)	<u>Growth over previous year's figure</u> (thousands)	<u>(per cent)</u>
1910	2565	1662	14	0.8
1911	3139	2002	340	20.4
1912	3416	2232	230	11.5
1913	4135	-	} 450	} 20.2
1914	4145	2682		
1915	4359	2851	169	6.3
1916	4644	3082	231	8.1
1917	4599	4532	1450	47.0
1918	6533	5284	752	16.6
1919	7926	6505	1221	23.1
1920	8348	6418	-87	-1.3

Notes: (a) No TUC was held in 1914: there are thus no membership figures for 1913. The growth calculations are therefore for two years taken together. (b) According to Bain et al., the TUC membership figures refer to the previous year in each case. If so, then in 1917 TUC membership exceeded total trade union membership: a proposition both implausible and contradictory. These columns should not, therefore be too closely compared.

Source: Bain, Bacon, Pimlott, 'The Labour Force' in Halsey, Trends in British Society since 1900, 123-6; and calculations thence.

these figures mask the loss of members to the armed forces, but the distinction between the two periods is clear nevertheless. A similar discontinuity appears in other labour statistics: for instance, the number of stoppages due to industrial disputes rose markedly in 1917 and 1918, as did the numbers of workers involved.<sup>11</sup> In short, even the national, aggregate, statistical data point to an important hiatus, corresponding with 1916. We now examine the revival which occurred from that year, largely from local evidence. As late as the spring of 1916, the Trades Council recorded that

At present the difficulties in organising the large non-union element in the District are greatly increased by the War. 12

In contrast, 1917 was 'a record year so far as interest in and development of Trade Unionism is concerned,'<sup>13</sup> whilst

The marked features of the year [1918] from the Trade Union point of view, apart from the general industrial unrest, are - (1) the strengthening and extension of the Trade Union movement; .... 14

It is perhaps wise briefly to review some of these developments, for their impact on the consciousness of trade union activists was strong.

11. Stoppages of work arising from industrial disputes in the UK were as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Stoppages beginning in year</u>	<u>No. of workers involved.</u>	<u>Working days lost</u>
1913	1459	664	9804
1914	972	447	9878
1915	672	448	2953
1916	532	276	2446
1917	730	872	5647
1918	1165	1116	5875
1919	1352	2591	34969

Source: Bain, Bacon and Pimlott, 127.

12. TC AR 1916, 2.

13. Ibid., 1918, 4.

14. Ibid., 1919, 2.



We have already mentioned the NAUL's 'great success in organising the numerous rubber workers in Edinburgh,' which won the Trades Council's 'Congratulations'.<sup>15</sup> Organisation began among chemical and hosiery workers,<sup>16</sup> among asylum and precious metal workers,<sup>17</sup> among dressmakers, milliners,<sup>18</sup> biscuit workers<sup>19</sup> and clerks.<sup>20</sup> This extension of the boundaries of trade unionism inspired the normally sober secretary of the Trades Council to a rare literary licence:

Even in occupations which were usually regarded as outwith the influence of Trade Unionism has the gospel spread. The policemen have been arrested. The Insurance Clerks are thinking of a new policy; the Bank Clerks are combining to check economic pressure; the Teachers are growing class conscious; and the Domestic Servants are endeavouring to make a clean sweep of old and hard traditions. 21

At the same time, where organisation existed, the density of union membership increased. In some cases this was due to the recruitment of women who had previously been excluded from union membership, as when the Bookbinders decided to admit women in 1918, and found their membership swelled by some 1200.<sup>22</sup> In other cases, it was due merely to a general strengthening of organisation, as among the laundry<sup>23</sup> and road transport workers.<sup>24</sup>

15. Ibid., 1918, 4.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 1919, 2.

18. Ibid., 1918, 7-8.

19. TC minutes, 10 September 1918.

20. NUC Edin. branch minutes, 4 March 1918.

21. TC AR 1919, 2: my emphasis (the past tense seems to indicate a sense of a new era's having arrived).

22. Ibid., 1918, 7.

23. Ibid., 4-7.

24. Ibid., 1919, 5; Tuckett, The Scottish Carter, 134-5, 144-5.

An attempt to explain this development solely by reference to the internal organisation of the trade union movement would not succeed. There were, it is true, attempts to improve the structure of the movement, and these had some effect.<sup>25</sup> But such an explanation would ignore the substantial evidence that the movement was bedevilled by organisational failings - rather than buoyed up by achievements. The constant theme of the Trades Council, for example, was just the 'lack of co-ordination, and consequent waste of effort';<sup>26</sup> intractable problems which could not, apparently, be overcome.

The central failing was competition between unions, associated with intense multi-unionism: laundry workers, for instance, were enrolled in 'five or six separate unions' even before J.H. Moore initiated the Laundry Workers' Union in 1917.<sup>27</sup> A conference called to 'arrange spheres of action for the unions which enrol/led women workers' achieved little. The Paper Workers contested with the Bookbinders over the latter's new women members;<sup>28</sup> whilst the Bakers, the Shop Assistants, and the General Workers Unions, together with the NAUL competed for biscuit workers.<sup>29</sup> For, essentially, the problems were rooted too deeply to be solved on a local basis.

We must, therefore, seek other explanations for the union ability to mobilise late in the war;<sup>30</sup> several factors were important.

25. E.g., TC AR 1916, 2; ESAE&I and ASE, Conference Proceedings, 18 January 1918, passim; see also s.6.3.
26. TC AR 1918, 7; cp TC AR 1917, 16.
27. TC AR 1918, 4-7. On J.H. Moore, see Labour Standard, 9 Oct. 1926.
28. TC AR 1918, 7.
29. TC Minutes (EC) 17 September 1918; see also 30 July, 13, (EC) 20, 27 August, 10 September 1918 for dispute between Wire drawers and Workers Unions.
30. It might be argued that multi-unionism and competition reflected a decentralised union structure, and that this was an important factor in unions' ability to cope with the rapid changes of wartime. (This would be to think of unions at this time as an organic structure.) This argument has some force, but it is hard to believe that the degree of inter-union competition was in fact helpful. In any case, decentralisation could be achieved within many unions.



First, certain important principles giving legitimacy to the capitalist enterprise were eroded. Secondly, at the same time a number of - relatively general - legitimising principles, to which wartime developments lent support, began to be extended increasingly to trade unions. Third, the role of trade unions was recognised by the state, and while this did mean abandoning some union standards, it had positive effects too. Fourth, there was an undoubted, though intangible, strengthening of what we may term the self-image of the working class, generated by the sense of wartime sacrifice. Fifth, a number of issues were generated, within the workplace, which were clearly important in terms of both legitimising principles available at a societal level, and of those applicable to union organisation. Consequently, mobilisation became relatively easy. Let us look at these factors in turn.

The principal objective of the capitalist business enterprise is, inevitably, the making of profit. In general, this is lent support by the operation of a market economy; it is also lent support, as a principle legitimising action, by its association with a number of other expressions. 'Efficiency', good 'organisation', opposition to 'waste', were all, however, during the war far more associated with the prosecution of the war effort:<sup>31</sup> to oversimplify somewhat, their central meaning was derived from the military, rather than from the business, context, and associated with national, rather than commercial interest.<sup>32</sup> State controls on profit, however ineffectual, further eroded the legitimacy of 'laissez faire'. Thus, certainly within the working class, 'profit' largely lost the support it had gained from these principles; conversely, it became associated with 'profiteering', a concept previously of little significance, but 'one of the emotional corrosives of the war period'.<sup>33</sup> Especially from 1916, 'profiteers' came under sustained attack from the popular press.<sup>34</sup>

31. We might also argue that, even before the war, the notion of 'efficiency' had achieved wider currency, deriving especially from its use by the 'Liberal imperialists' and during the Boer War. Cp Matthew, The Liberal Imperialists esp. 225-64, 291-5.

32. Cp Marwick, Deluge, esp. 162-78.

33. Ibid., 131.

34. Ibid., 132-3.

This was reflected within the working class movement. In the advertisements appearing in the Edinburgh Trades Council's Annual Reports in favour of the Co-operative movement,<sup>35</sup> for example, by 1918 assumptions about 'profiteering' were uncontroversial enough to be central to the message:

T H E       O L D       S Y S T E M

must be scrapped and modern methods substituted. Other economies will, no doubt, suggest themselves, but the great break away from

P R O F I T E E R I N G

will undoubtedly help to solve your difficulties. In your own interests, therefore, you should make arrangements to join. 36

and so forth. As the Commission of Enquiry into the Industrial Unrest in Scotland reported, in a sentence of inordinate complexity,

There is no doubt that the chief and fundamental cause of the existing unrest is the increased cost of living, which, in the mind of the workers, is the result of the Government having failed timeously, and effectively, to control the production, supply, and distribution, of food, and thus opening the door to what the worker terms 'profiteering', by which he means the amassing by a few people, of abnormal wealth, out of the necessities of the country. The actual increase in the cost of living does not appear to be so important a factor in the worker's mind as the belief that 'profiteering' exists .... 37

Our second factor is an associated one. As the legitimacy of 'profit' was eroded, in part by state action, in part by the assault on 'profiteering', but in part by its becoming distanced from related, normally supportive, legitimising principles; so some of the latter

35. Placed, apparently, by the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society; St. Cuthbert's, the main Edinburgh store, placed advertisements separately. The latter's advertisements lacked the former's idealism, concentrating on their moderate terms, etc. Cp TC AR 1916, 12; TC AR 1919, 7.

36. TC AR 1918, 6.

37. Cd. 8669, 3.



became increasingly open to employment in furthering trade union activities and objectives. It was not that unions necessarily started to use principles which they had previously shunned; rather that the latter now worked. For instance, the organising secretary of the NAUL had, very likely, been pointing out the importance of organisation for years before his 'stirring address' to the rubber workers:

the employers having long since been  
organised it was up to the workers  
without delay to do the same. 38

On this occasion, however, the notion - and benefits - of 'organisation' may have been more obvious to his audience, for, as we have seen, they joined in large numbers, and elected shop stewards.<sup>39</sup>

Again, much could be made of the 'discoveries' of the Welfare movement:

The test of experience has proved to  
Government officials and to many others  
who, at the beginning of the War, desired  
to scrap every Trade Union regulation and  
restriction, that long hours are uneconomic  
and wasteful; that behind the rules put in  
force by trade unionists was a world of  
experience and industrial knowledge.  
Scientific study and enlightened and  
unprejudiced management are now reaching  
conclusions arrived at fifty years ago  
by thinking Trade Unionists. 40

'Efficiency' then, was no longer the indisputable domain of the employer. Another example, though at one remove: the ideas of co-ordination, efficiency, elimination of wasteful competition, were important in giving legitimacy to plans to restructure the trade union movement. Amalgamation of unions would save 'expense and labour', and 'the petty, personal ambitions that spring out of the present competition would end'.<sup>41</sup>

38. NAUL No.292 branch minutes, 1 May 1917.

39. Ibid.

40. TC AR 1918,8; On the welfare movement, cp N.Whiteside, 'Industrial welfare and labour regulation in Britain at the time of the First World War', Int.Rev.Soc.Hist. 25, 1980 esp. 310-18; Proud, Welfare Work.

41. TC AR 1918, 7; cp TC AR 1916, 2.

The third factor which coincided to ease unions' problems of mobilisation was their recognition by the state. We have referred to this in previous chapters, and touched on it earlier in this. It had many aspects. Clearly union leaders were consulted at a national level on many matters: to this extent they could no longer be entirely 'beyond the pale'. (We shall not pursue this aspect, which is well-covered in the historical literature.)<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the legal status of trade unions was enhanced,<sup>43</sup> and this had very immediate practical effects. In 1915 the NAUL started to organise workers at Musselburgh wire mills,

who, although engaged on Government work, were being paid very low wages. Meetings ... were held to explain to the workers their position under the Munitions Act, and the advantages that would accrue from joining a trade union. <sup>44</sup>

Locally, the trade union movement was called to be represented on a variety of statutory, official, semi-official and voluntary bodies: exemption tribunals under the Derby Scheme, Relief of Distress Fund committees, Local Pensions Committees, Food Control Committees, and so on.

Of course, the other side of trade union recognition was an attempt by the Government to control labour by winning its leaders, together with a legal structure which - while recognising unions' right to exist - severely circumscribed workers' freedoms. Naturally, this created problems for unions, such as the tendency for disputes to arise

42. Cp, e.g., Marwick, Deluge, esp. 58-65; Middlemas, Politics in Industrial Society, esp. 71-81, 88-90, 123-33; Harrison, 'The War Emergency Workers' National Committee 1914-1920'; J.M.Winter, Socialism and the Challenge of War. Ideas and Politics in Britain 1912-1918 (London 1974), esp. ch.7.

43. Notably by the Munitions of War Acts: the 1917 Act, for instance, read in part: 'No worker employed on or in connection with munitions work shall be discharged on the ground that he has joined or is a member of a trade union, or that he has taken part in any trade dispute and if any employer discharges a workman on any such ground he shall be guilty of an offence....' (7 & 8 Geo. 5, c. 45, s.9).

44. TC AR 1916, 2. A branch was formed, and wage rises gained.



between union members and their own leaders, rather than with employers. But, certainly locally, the trade unions seem to have taken a very sanguine approach: while broadly supportive of the war effort, and of the 'national interest', they retained a strong sense of class (as well as national) identity. As Bernard Waites has pointed out, 'certain features of the War's impact could be both socially cohesive and at the same time foster class and sectional consciousness.'<sup>45</sup> Thus the workers needed defence against 'the clutching hand of capitalism',<sup>46</sup> even (perhaps especially) during wartime; the Government shewed, for instance, 'no capacity or desire to deal with the problem' of food price rises.<sup>47</sup> There were, therefore, at least by the end of the War, few illusions about the character of trade unionists' involvement in many of these committees: 'no effective power was ever given' to the Food Control Committees, and

What powers were given have been gradually diminished. The Food Control Committees are in reality mere rags to clothe the nakedness of bureaucracy. ... They have unlimited power to pass resolutions, but no power to put them into operation. <sup>48</sup>

Such an evaluation was complemented by a willingness to organise demonstrations and deputations on the issue in question, whilst being represented on the relevant committee.<sup>49</sup>

Our fourth coincident factor, the strengthening self-image of the working-class, is more elusive. On the one hand it is an historiographical commonplace;<sup>50</sup> on the other, we are suggesting here perhaps a surge in confidence, rather than a legitimising principle

45. B.A.Waites, 'The effect of the First World War on class and status in England, 1910 -1920', Journal of Contemporary History 11, 1976, 42.

46. TC AR 1916, 5.

47. Ibid., 6.

48. TC AR 1919, 13.

49. See, e.g., TC AR 1918, 12.

50. Cp, e.g., Waites, 'Effect of war on class and status'; Marwick, Deluge, esp. 218-26, 316-17.

as such: it is thus less easy to identify instances where this factor was important. The sense of war service having some kind of collective exchange value - homes 'fit for heroes', and the like - seems not to have been used publicly by Edinburgh's trade union movement until after the war (and, incidentally or significantly, until after it had entered the language of national politics).

It is<sup>on</sup> our final element that the others turn. As we saw in chapters 5 and 6, the exigencies of war generated a host of problems within the various workplaces. Industrial relations problems, however, are often beyond the ability of trade unions to influence, simply because they are unable to induce among their members (or potential members) a sense that the problem is a problem. Alternatively, the union organisation itself may not recognise the situation confronting it as problematical. What is important, then, is that the problems which arose as the war progressed were perceived as relevant problems both by the unions and their members; and that in some cases they were seen as problems which could be influenced by union action. Our suggestion is that many of the problems could be understood in terms of the legitimising principles which the war was making available. Thus, for the Clerks, whose union was small and lacked control over recruitment, dilution, for instance - the 'serious danger [to] which the Clerk is subjected by the influx of partially qualified people into offices' - could be understood in terms of the 'danger of inefficiency'.<sup>51</sup>

More important, perhaps, one major problem was present with ever-greater intensity during the later years of the war: the problem of rising prices. This provided a central focus for working class mobilisation, and for two main reasons. On the one hand, it provided a critical link between social distress and workplace organisation. As the Trades Council pointed out, it was 'in the trades and occupations

51. NUC Edin. branch minutes, 5 August 1918.



which are not so well organised that the workers have been unable to maintain a proper standard of life'.<sup>52</sup> In well-organised establishments, achievement was frequent:

Long period agreements have been suspended. The rapidity with which food prices have changed has necessitated the review of rates of wages at stated intervals. Wages in munition and some other trades are now open for reconsideration every four months. 53

Of course, by no means all these rises were achieved by 'dispute': indeed, most were 'granted as the result of negotiation or arbitration'.<sup>54</sup> But the link between union organisation and adequate pay seems to have been clear.

On the other hand, however, price rises - especially food price rises - was an issue which could draw on a whole range of legitimising principles, sustained not only within the working class, but actively propagated by national institutions. A major cause of the inflation was 'the rampant and rapacious profiteer';<sup>55</sup> the workers and their families were prepared to suffer hardship if the sacrifice was equal, but not 'to use glorified soup kitchens so as to keep the well-to-do immune from hardship and inconvenience';<sup>56</sup> they were particularly unwilling to do so when the Government had only 'to completely control and regulate' food supplies<sup>57</sup> to overcome the problem:

If all foodstuffs had been commandeered, and distribution regulated from the outbreak of war, and home production stimulated and encouraged, the present crisis could have been avoided. 58

52. TC AR 1919, 5.

53. TC AR 1918, 8.

54. Ibid.

55. TC AR 1919, 5.

56. TC AR 1918, 12.

57. Ibid.

58. TC AR 1917, 8.

The achievement of the trade union movement - in recruitment and membership - during the later years of the war was, therefore, based primarily on the conjunction of favourable circumstances. There is little sign that, in Edinburgh, any major advances were made in the creation of institutions capable of generating legitimising principles or shaping issues - if we leave aside the one major achievement of large-scale recruitment and organisation at the workplace. In contrast to the engineering centres of the west of Scotland, Coventry and Sheffield, no strong shop stewards' movement emerged. In the rubber mills, and in many other sectors, the achievement was the simple formation of a union. Rather, the institutional structure of trade unionism remained relatively stable in form, even though far stronger in membership: it seems to have been capable of deploying, often quite effectively, legitimising principles which were already available, and of translating them into the working environment. It could 'negotiate' the meanings of principles originating elsewhere. But in essence, its victories were achieved using weapons forged by others.

By way of concluding this section, we may look briefly at two disputes which occurred late in the war. The first, in the spring of 1917, concerned the dressmakers, 'whose low wages and miserable earnings were proverbial'.<sup>59</sup> Whilst previous efforts had failed, the Shop Assistants Union attempted to recruit, and 'Once a start was made, the women flocked into the union, and a spirit of revolt was born'.<sup>60</sup> The tactics of the union seem to have been canny. A 'modest and fair' wage claim was put to the employers, and had the effect of splitting them. Some firms conceded; but the larger ones did not.

A strike ensued. The spirit, the loyalty, and the courage of the girls won the fight after a six weeks' struggle. 61

Council held that

The fine fight by the Dressmakers against a strong combination of employers was one of the factors that led to the successful organising efforts of other unions .... 62

59. TC AR 1918, 7.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., 8.



Another important factor was that 'a section of the press - The Evening News - several prominent citizens, and the general public, were all on the side of the women'.<sup>63</sup> This was almost unprecedented in a strike in wartime (indeed, in any strike); although to be sure a strike in dressmaking could not be presented as unpatriotic so easily as a strike in, say, munitions. Of course, the unions mobilised labour and working class opinion effectively too: demonstrations were held, 37 union organisations of various kinds contributed £84 13s 11d to a strike appeal.<sup>64</sup> Labour councillors were brought into action.<sup>65</sup> Probably this played a part in swinging 'public opinion', but such methods had previously failed too often for us to believe they can alone account for the breadth of support. They were able to employ a vocabulary of motives which was, temporarily, biased in favour of the workers.

The second dispute occurred at Middlemas & Son's biscuit factory in the city, in September and October 1918. The workers, again largely women, sought union membership in order to 'level up their rates of pay' in line with other factories in the industry.<sup>66</sup> Management raised no objection to union membership in principle.<sup>67</sup> But then, according to one account, some of the women joined the union, and were 'straightway dismissed': 'Some of their fellow-workers struck in sympathy.'<sup>68</sup> In another version, management refused negotiations, and the women thereupon struck.<sup>69</sup> In either event the firmness of management's approach is clear. With some workers out (apparently about 60), but many others still working, the employer reduced the hours and raised the wages of those still at work, while refusing to reinstate those on strike 'in a body'.<sup>70</sup> Conversely, the unions seem to have been in

63. Ibid.

64. TC AR 1918, 20.

65. Ibid., 7-8.

66. TC AR 1919. 6.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. TC minutes, 10 September 1918.

70. Ibid., (EC) 17 September 1918.

disarray. It seems that the workers joined the Shop Assistants Union, (or perhaps only approached it for financial assistance and advice) only after they had struck (or been dismissed).<sup>71</sup> The Shop Assistants were at this precise time in the midst of a demarcation dispute over recruitment of biscuit factory workers.<sup>72</sup> The women were under pressure from their families to return to work:<sup>73</sup> we should not forget that the cost of living in 1918 was extremely high, and compensated for only by rising pay levels. 'In the end,' the Trades Council recorded, '... the contest had to be temporarily given up. The arbitrary power of the management, and the fear of dismissal, held in check the natural instincts of the bulk of the employees of the firm.'<sup>74</sup>

So although both disputes occurred in previously non-union workplaces, one was successful, while in the other the employer prevailed. These cases illustrate several points. Even during this period, unions were not guaranteed success: organisational failings, combined with astute tactics on the employers' part, could make matters at least very difficult for the unions. Particularly in those sectors only recently organised, success depended largely on the ability to mobilise people into forms of 'industrial action'. But this in itself was highly dependent not so much on trade union organisation, as on the ability to mobilise <sup>of</sup> opinion more widely: union organisation did not seem able to sustain <sup>itself</sup> legitimising principles strong enough to 'justify' large-scale or long-term industrial action. Finally, even in wartime, the fear of dismissal was not negligible.

- 71. Both TC AR 1919, 6, and TC minutes 10 September 1918, give this impression.
- 72. TC minutes (EC) 17 September 1918. Cp also 12 February 1918. This was, of course, long before the Bridlington Agreement, and such arbitration was a normal part of trades councils' activities, cp A. Clinton, 'Trades Councils from the beginning of the Twentieth Century to the Second World War', (Univ. of London Ph.D. 1973), esp. 45-6. The dispute was eventually settled in the Shop Assistants' favour: TC Minutes (EC) 5 October 1918.
- 73. TC minutes (EC) 17 September 1918; cp TC minutes (EC) 15 Oct. 1918.
- 74. TC AR 1919, 6; see also *ibid.*, 22.



### 7.3 'A state of flux,'<sup>75</sup> 1919 - 1920

The armistice was a momentous event; yet few trade unionists seem to have regarded it as fundamentally altering their purpose. Alexander Caldwell, the Trades Council's vice-president, an eloquent painter, opening the first post-war meeting, referred from the chair to

the fact that the week just closed had seen the cessation of hostilities in the devastating war of the last four years; and while expressing hope that the resulting peace would be a just and lasting one, he trusted that no political or other changes would distract our attention from the task of overcoming the enemy on the home front. 76

The attitude elsewhere was equally matter-of-fact: the Rubber Workers dispatched a congratulatory telegram to Sir Douglas Haig 'on the Great Victory achieved by Greater Britain and her Allies in the War, now happily over', and then got down to business;<sup>77</sup> the Railwaymen considered a motion 'that the EC be called together on the cessation of hostilities for the purpose of declaring a General Strike to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat in this country', rejected it, and did likewise.<sup>78</sup> Looking back six months later, the advent of peace did not seem to the Trades Council one of the 'marked features of the year from the trade union point of view'.<sup>79</sup>

In the world of 1919 and early 1920, mobilisation of trade union members remained quite straightforward. Again, in seeking to explain this, the coincidence of a number of factors is important. First, there was a significant, though temporary and partial, loss of self-confidence by important elements of capital and the state. This was associated with increased problems of co-ordination between employers, and between employers and government. Middlemas has written

- 75. W.Wallace, employers' chairman, in ESAE&I and ASE, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Engineers working rules', 19 Sept. 1919, 7.
- 76. TC minutes 19 November 1918: for personal information on Alexander Caldwell, I am grateful to Mr. F.Lawson.
- 77. NAUL No 292 branch minutes 14 November 1918.
- 78. NUR No 1 branch minutes 10, 24 November 1918.
- 79. TC AR 1919, 2.

of 'the government's near-panic early in 1919' as it confronted a national coal strike with the loyalty of army and police in doubt.<sup>80</sup> At the same time state control of industry could no longer be justified, yet the employers lacked representative organisations which could engage in negotiations with the government on their collective behalf.<sup>81</sup> Mistrust, already sown by the state's wartime 'interference' in management, was intensified when - in the absence of representative <sup>bodies</sup> government appeared to be conceding demands to unions without consulting employers.<sup>82</sup> The lack of co-ordination between employers and government seems to have been particularly intense during the first half of 1919.<sup>83</sup> In addition, there was an important section of opinion within government - especially, it seems, within the Ministry of Labour - and increasingly too among employers, which accepted that there could be no return to pre-war labour relations. The problem was not how to re-establish the old forms of labour control, but how to re-establish control, given the increased power of the shop floor, such that business could be successfully prosecuted: thus Whitley councils, thus the National Industrial Conference of 1919-1921.<sup>84</sup>

80. Middlemas, 145.

81. The FBI had been set up in 1916, but was thought 'soft' by the most important (Engineering) employers federation. The NCEO was thus established in competition in 1919, but the strength and ambition of the EEF prevented either gaining a dominant role. Cp Middlemas, 128, 146-7, 160-1.

82. P. Maguire, 'Employers attitudes to industrial relations and Government policies 1915-20', paper given to Conference of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 27 November 1982 (abstract); cp Middlemas, 127.

83. Maguire, own notes.

84. Cp Lowe, 'The failure of consensus in Britain', 649-75; V. Allen, 'The National Industrial Conference 1919 - 1921' in Allen, The Sociology of Industrial Relations (London 1971), 83-90; H. Ramsay, 'Cycles of control: worker participation in sociological and historical perspective', Sociology 11, 1977, esp. 485-8; Middlemas 137-41.



Indeed, Middlemas has gone so far as to assert that

The stability of the political system in the 'revolutionary years' 1919-20 owes something to the majority [of employers] who ... had come to accept the Ministry of Labour view that formal sanctions against strikers, and non-recognition, had been proved unworkable as well as unacceptable. 85

We now turn to our second factor. After the war issues remained which were legitimate in terms of principles generally available, and which were also relevant to union action at workplace level. Two are outstanding: inflation, and the shorter working week. According to the various indices, the working class cost of living rose by between 22 and 24 per cent over the year 1919-20.<sup>86</sup> 'During the past year,' recorded the Trades Council in 1920, 'the mad race between wages and prices has continued.'<sup>87</sup> There seems to have been little initial need for industrial action. As we saw in chapter 4 there were few, if any, organised trades which did not obtain some increase during these years. However, although the process of organisation was no doubt aided by the inflation, and the need to pursue wage rises, union success was at best mixed.<sup>88</sup> As chapter 4 also shows, despite the wage increases, the city's trade unions found it most difficult to maintain their standard of living in these years.<sup>89</sup> The problems the unions encountered in fully regaining ground lost to inflation, and the frustrations engendered, are perhaps reflected by the Trades Council's decision to hold a demonstration on the High Cost of Living in July 1920, and in the terms of the motion proposed:

That this meeting - holding that high prices are due to causes under human control, calls upon the Government to take the necessary steps to reduce prices or to give place to those who will. 90

85. Middlemas 127; cp Lowe, 'Ministry of Labour', 24.

86. See table 4.1

87. TC AR 1920, 2.

88. TC AR 1920, 2.

89. See figure 4.6; cp TC AR 1920, 2; TC minutes 21 September 1919.

90. TC minutes (EC) 18 July 1920.

The other linking issue was the shorter working week. This was, of course, the occasion for a celebrated strike on the Clyde in January and February 1919: a strike which was defeated, at least in part, because the government determined that it was unofficial, quasi-revolutionary, action which could not be allowed to succeed. The 40 hours movement gained some support in Edinburgh; but, perhaps more important, hours were reduced in virtually every organised trade, as table 7.2 shows. Again the bulk of these reductions were

Table 7.2 Basic working week in certain Edinburgh trades

			<u>1914 - 1927</u>				
	<u>1914</u>	<u>1918</u>	<u>1919</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1921</u> & <u>1922</u>	<u>1923</u> & <u>1924</u>	<u>1925</u> to <u>1927</u>
Brewery workers	56	..	50	50	50	..	..
Bricklayers	51	50	44	44	44	44	44
Engineers	54	54	47	47	47	47	47
'Labourers'	50	50	44	44	44	44	..
Masons	51	50	44	44	44	48	48
Painters	50	50	44	44	44	44	44
Bookbinders	50	50	48	48	48	48	48
Compositors	50	50	48	48	48	48	48
Railway drivers	60	..	48	48	48	48	48
" firemen	60	..	48	48	48	48	48
Rubber workers	55	55	47	47	47	48	48
Sheet metal	51	51	47	47	47	48	48
Slaters	50	50	44	44	44	44	44
Bakers	48-55	48-52 <sup>1</sup>	48-51	48-51	44	45-47	45
Shop	over	60	48	48	48	48	48
assistants	60	60	48	or less	or less	or less	or less
Laundry work	..	54	48-52	48	48	48	48
Electricians	50-54	..	47	47	47	47	47

Source: TC ARs, 1918-27.

Note: .. : not available.

achieved by negotiation. The Rubber Workers, for instance, demanded a 44 hour week in January 1919; six weeks later they settled for a nationally-agreed 47 hours.<sup>91</sup> In sum, then, issues were available which were both amenable to action within the workplace and trade union context, and clearly achievable by such means.

91. NAUL No 292 branch minutes 12 January, 23 February 1919.



The third coincident factor was the redefining of national (and community) interest. The threat to the nation was no longer so conspicuous; the national interest therefore became more controversial, and class and sectional interests were strengthened. We have seen that, during the war, the trade union movement was quite capable of proposing, at least, a somewhat negotiated version of the national interest:

support was given to the war in the hope that the country would win and be able to formulate such conditions of settlement as should make for permanent peace. 92

This position specifically included criticism not only of the management of the war effort, but of war aims. Still more, after the war, were questions asked about the objectives of the national struggle. The fact that 'brutal' employers still received 'public and civic honours' showed 'that the old regime has not passed, that sweaters and hypocrites need not yet fear social ostracism.'<sup>93</sup> There was a decided sense that the government could not be trusted: that it had made use of the workers in a national emergency, but was not thereafter prepared properly to acknowledge their aspirations. This sense grew as 1919 became 1920:

if one tithe of the energy and Statesmanship displayed in the production of munitions had been transferred to work of real national importance, unemployment would have been wiped out of existence. But the path of the present Government has been one long trail strewn with broken pledges. 94

Nonetheless, the sense of renewal, of national reconstruction and a common purpose, was one to which the establishment paid at least lip-service; and it was a sense which trade unionists were prepared to use even if they had doubts about its honesty. Thus, in negotiation with

92. TC AR 1919, 17.

93. TC AR 1919, 6.

94. TC AR 1920, 5.

the employer's federation, an ASE negotiator accepted

that during the war that was not a suitable time to discuss alterations of byelaws, but now that we are come to the period of reconstruction when we are trying to make the land fit for heroes to live in, we propose to put these [draft working rules] as our part in trying to reconstruct things in this district, and in this particular industry .... 95

In short, the nation now included the working class, whose aspirations were valid. Interestingly, the employers in September 1919 could make no response to this argument (although defending their position on other grounds).

We are, then, arguing that the trade unions' advance was due to their being offered a set of legitimising principles, supported by the dominant institutional order, which was relatively open to action in their interests - rather than to their having themselves generated quite independent principles. But the unions were not unaware that they were engaged in an ideological struggle. This was particularly true in relation to the national interest, and to the war. The Trades Council, in the months after the armistice, put much effort into strengthening its links with ex-servicemen. The government, fearing a threat to public order from disaffected former soldiers - 'in the event of rioting,' a Home Office agent pointed out, 'for the first time in history, the rioters will be better trained than the troops',<sup>96</sup> - attempted several stratagems to frustrate relations between trade unions and ex-servicemen.<sup>97</sup> Trade unions, too, had reasons to fear

95. ESAE&I and ASE, Local Conference Proceedings, 'In re Engineers Working Rules', 19 September 1919, 3; the speaker was William Hills.

96. Home Office, Directorate of Intelligence, 'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom', Cabinet Papers, C.P. 1830 of 2 September 1920 (Cab.24/111), quoted in S.R.Ward, 'Intelligence Surveillance of British Ex-Servicemen 1918-1920', Hist.Journal 16, 1973, 179.

97. Ward, 179-88; the background to the government's fear was the unrest in the armed forces during 1917-1919; see D. Gill and G.Dallas, 'Mutiny at Etaples base in 1917', Past and Present 69, 1975, 88-112; D.Englander & J.Osborne, 'Jack, Tommy and Henry Dubb: the armed forces and the working class', Hist. Journal 21, 1978, 593-621; A.Rothstein, The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919 (London, 1980).



demobilisation: 'once the demobilisation riots began,' according to one study, the 'spectre of red and white armies haunted capital and Labour respectively'.<sup>98</sup> Yet more prosaic fears were also important in Edinburgh. Former soldiers and sailors sought their old jobs back, often vainly. A large pool of unemployed quickly formed, and the authorities clearly attempted to divert responsibility onto trade union practices.

The return of the ex-Servicemen has been made the occasion for fresh attacks on the Unions. Time and again on public platforms the slander is reiterated by responsible ministers of the Government that organised Labour is placing obstacles in the way of the ex-Servicemen's return to industrial life. 99

The local unions, through the Trades Council, considered the problems of demobilisation and resettlement in two special conferences as early as February 1919: in May and June a joint committee was established between the Trades Council and the Discharged and Demobilised Sailors' and Soldiers' Federation.<sup>100</sup> (which seems first to have been referred to in the Trades Council minutes as a 'Workers' and Soldiers' Council').<sup>101</sup> But such initiatives were to be frustrated. Although some 'useful work' was done, and an 'interesting campaign against certain "ultra-patriotic" employers' planned,<sup>102</sup> the joint committee seems to have broken up 'owing to the influence of interested politicians and a party Press'<sup>103</sup> - although the immediate cause was the Trades Council's amalgamation with the Labour Party.<sup>104</sup> Thereafter

a continuous crusade of slander has been conducted in the Press and on many platforms for the purpose of alienating the ex-Service man from the Trade Unions. 105

98. Englander and Osborne, 620.

99. TC AR 1920, 5.

100. Formed in April 1917 with the aid of a Scottish Liberal, M.P. J.M. Hogge, who opposed conscription: cp Ward, 181, 185-7.

101. TC minutes 20 May 1919: it is possible that this refers to another organisation, but the coincidence of date makes this unlikely.

102. TC AR 1920, 10.

103. Ibid.

104. TC minutes 11 Nov. 1919; it is significant that the Trades Council was divided on - at least - how it should approach the problem of ex-servicemen. An attempt to try to maintain the connexion with the ex-servicemen's Federation was agreed by just 34 votes to 27: TC minutes 18 November 1919.

105. TC AR 1920, 10.

The fourth factor requires less discussion. We have already discussed the role during the war of those legitimising principles associated with the language of organisation, planning and efficiency; they remained influential thereafter. The reorganisation of the TUC after the war drew on both parallels with the bureaucratic organisation of the Civil Service and 'the terminology of war'.<sup>106</sup> We shall see in chapter 9 that the reorganisation of the Edinburgh Trades Council sprang in part from similar motives.<sup>107</sup> Of course, such language was often not associated directly with wartime experiences: we have seen, for instance, how organisation, efficiency, planning were given meaning by their use in industry. During 1919, too, the notion of 'profiteering' was still a powerful source of legitimation; we shall look at this in more detail in a later section.

Our fifth factor is this: the status and prestige achieved by - or granted to - the trade unions during the war could not be immediately withdrawn. In particular, the government's anxiety to isolate the 'revolutionary' or 'political' element by strengthening national leaderships could be perceived as an acceptance of an important role for the trade union movement.<sup>108</sup> The factor is not easy to tackle from local data. But the trade unions were deeply involved by 1919 in aspects of what we may term the state apparatus; and to this extent their status was enhanced. Inevitably they were involved in the administration of pensions and unemployment insurance.<sup>109</sup> Virtually every trade had representation on the Education Authority's Advisory Council.<sup>110</sup> Several of the city's leading trade unionists were JPs: it seems, for instance, to have been almost automatic for those who held senior office in the Trades Council, at least for more than one year, to have been honoured

106. V.L.Allen, 'The re-organisation of the Trade [sic] Union Congress, 1918-1927', Brit.J.Sociol. 11, 1960, esp. 25,29; cp A.Bullock, The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Vol.I, 1881-1940 (London 1960); 107-111, 147-9.

107. TC AR 1920, 10 -13.

108. Middlemas, 146-51; Foster, 'British Imperialism' 31-6.

109. E.g., TC AR 1919, 37; Whiteside, 'Welfare legislation and the unions', 857-74.

110. E.g., TC AR 1919, 35.



in this way.<sup>111</sup> Certainly the Trades Council imagined that

Our influence is distinctly felt in  
our local governing bodies, and  
Government departments consult us  
more freely than in the past. 112

No doubt there was an element of 'incorporation' here, but this should not be exaggerated. For instance, in rhetoric at least, some of the trade union justices were militant, anti-government, and conscious of class interest. Nor should we imagine that this enhanced 'status' had no implications for the business of union workplace organisation. Two instances may be given here. Firstly, the Whitley Councils, whatever their real, or long-term, effects, were undoubtedly perceived by some unions as likely to strengthen their organisation.<sup>113</sup> In addition, union JPs were - at least during the heady days of 1919-1920 - acceptable arbitrators in industrial disputes.<sup>114</sup>

We now turn to our final coincident factor: the rising level of union morale. This rests on the proposition that the ability to mobilise can itself constitute a legitimising principle. It can do so in two senses. It can constitute a most effective argument for union negotiators. Thus in September 1919 the ASE took a grievance to the employers' association. After prolonged argument, the patience of the union men broke:

We both talk from the strength of the case which we have, and this is probably the strongest position which we are in, namely, that the men have absolutely got their backs up in the matter, and it will not be very difficult for us to stop them from going, and that is the biggest argument in the matter. 115

- 111. The following TC officials were JPs (with date they became justices): Alexander Smith, Secretary 1911-25 (by 1915); Andrew Eunson, President 1916-19 (1917); Alexander Caldwell, Vice-President 1918-19, President 1919-20 (1919); George Hogg, Secretary, Leith TC & LP 1920-21 (by 1921). Other trade union JPs (1916-20) included: J.R.Bell (NUR), J.Campbell (Bookbinders ; by 1919 local organiser of the Shop Assistants).
- 112. TC AR 1920, 2.
- 113. Cp, e.g., NAUL No 292 branch minutes, 8 August 1918, 16 Jan. 1919.
- 114. Cp, e.g., 'Award by the Referee [Andrew Eunson JP] in the Dispute between the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Scottish Motor Traction Company Limited', 23 August 1920. In this case the union JP concerned found in favour of the union: no doubt it was not always so.
- 115. ASE & ESAE&I, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Engineers working Rules', 19 Sept. 1919, 31: The speaker is J.F.Wallace, ASE.

But, in addition, confidence that others will join in common action is an important justification for taking action. Thus the Edinburgh Railwaymen's telegram claim, 'All men and women out', during the 1919 strike, though technically incorrect as we have seen,<sup>116</sup> nonetheless played a role in legitimising the action.

#### 7.4 Union organisation, 1917 - 1920

Whilst union mobilisation remained quite easy during 1919 and 1920 - and union victory was the rule - the achievements were based on factors which were not the conscious creation of the movement itself. The legitimisation of action was easier chiefly because substantial concessions had been made to the trade union movement and the working class during the war, and action against them was consequently more difficult to co-ordinate and justify. Broadly, and with partial exceptions which we shall discuss, the trade union movement in Edinburgh did not generate mobilising institutions of any real strength during the period from 1917 to 1920; it failed to consolidate organisationally on its ephemeral achievements. It was not that there was no awareness that the gains might be transient:

If our gains in 1919 are not to be ephemeral, there must be more unity of purpose and more co-operative action than the past has shown. 117

Yet, for several reasons, lessons were not - or could not be - learnt.

The first reason also reflects the nature of the gains of 1917-1920. In almost all unions, existing organisational structures were placed under severe strain. Perhaps the clearest cases are in those unions, largely of unskilled, semi-skilled, and white-collar workers, which grew beyond recognition. In some cases entirely new structures had to be created, as the NAUL in the rubber works. Here the union had to assimilate over 2,100 new members within three months of its formation:<sup>118</sup> even simply to administer such numbers was a major task.<sup>119</sup>

116. S.6.9 above.

117. TC AR 1919, 9 - 13.

118. NAUL No 292 branch minutes, 14 August 1917.

119. Ibid., April, 11, 15, 21 May 1917.



Thus within two months of its formation, the branch committee had to be enlarged as 'so many sections of the works' were unrepresented.<sup>120</sup>

Inevitably, all this had to be achieved by men and women who were inexperienced at managing a union's affairs, and in their spare time.<sup>121</sup> The growth of the National Union of Clerks was less spectacular, but still created major problems. In September 1917 the Edinburgh branch had 25 members: by the end of the year this figure had doubled to 57; by September 1919 it stood at 378.<sup>122</sup> Here, an existing structure was altered markedly:<sup>123</sup> from being a somewhat exclusive group, composed largely of trade union and political activists,<sup>124</sup> the branch became

120. Ibid., 28 June 1917.

121. Although an 'all-day man' was appointed as secretary in Aug. 1917 (Ibid., 15 July, 14 Aug. 1917), and the works does seem to have been a major object of the local (full time) NAUL organiser's attention.

122. NUC Edin. branch minutes, 7 Jan 1918, 13 Oct 1919.

123. Ibid., 12, 19 May 1919.

124. For its size, the Edin. NUC contained a remarkably high proportion of men and women active in the local labour movement. The following can be identified as NUC members between 1911 and 1916 (when its membership was in the region of 25) and as active in the labour movement during the following decade:

<u>Name</u>	<u>First reference in NUC minutes</u>	<u>Positions held in labour movement, 1916 - 1927</u>
T.A. Cairns	3 June 1912	T&LC Treasurer 1922-25 T&LC President 1925-26 T&LC EC 1926-30 SDF EC 1921-22 SDF del. to T&LC 1922-23 T&LC EC 1920-21 T&LC President 1921-22 SDF EC 1921-22 NUC Edin. President 1913-15 STUC Gen. Sec. 1922-46 NUC Nat. President
W. Elger	1 July 1912	T&LC EC 1916-20 T&LC Vice-Pres. 1920-21 STUC Gen. Council 1921-22 Labour Party Town Council Candidate 1919
Grace Mewhort	1 July 1912	T&LC Librarian 1922-23 T&LC Political Officer 1923-36 SDF EC 1921-22
Frank Smithies	7 October 1912	T&LC Treasurer 1920-23 ILP (West branch) del. to T&LC
George Williamson	1 September 1913	ILP (Central) member NCLC Organising Tutor for Edin. c. 1921-23 NCLC General Secretary 1923-63
J.P.M. Millar	6 September 1915	

one with a mass membership, and with large sections of its members in various firms.<sup>125</sup>

In short, efficient administration was by far the most immediate concern of union organisation during this period: its absence could easily appear to be the movement's major organisational failing. Deeper questions, such as those relating to the purpose and role of union organisations, could - understandably - be pressed into the background: and the more so as union activity was, given the favourable situation, apparently having positive results. There is an interesting illustration of this in a dispute we have previously touched upon. In January 1919 the Clerks were approached by a disaffected member of the NAUL at the Castle Rubber Mills: 'he thought there was a possibility of the clerical staff, of 100 members, ... transferring to the NUC.'<sup>126</sup> He and his colleagues 'had been rather badly treated by their present union.'<sup>127</sup> After some effort by the NUC, they 'transferred':<sup>128</sup> such was the Clerk's euphemism. To the NAUL this was 'encroachment', even 'poaching': and indeed, prima facie, such it was. But in protesting to the Trades Council,<sup>129</sup> they encountered problems. They had been affiliated to the Trades Council only for a short period, had appointed only four delegates, of whom only one attended regularly, and he was hardly a prominent member.<sup>130</sup> They had, in short, made little effort to consolidate their relationships with the trade union movement outside their own place of work. The Clerks had done so assiduously: one of their delegates, a member of the Executive Committee of the Trades Council since at least 1916, was 'articulate' and able enough to be elected to the General Council of the STUC - just the third woman to be so.<sup>131</sup> For the Rubber

125. E.g., about 100 at N.B. Rubber Co., about 60 at the Ministry of Labour; NUC Edin. branch minutes 17 March, 5 May 1919.

126. NUC Edin. branch minutes, 16 January 1919.

127. Ibid., 17 March 1919.

128. Ibid., 21 April, 5 May 1919.

129. TC minutes (EC), 13 May 1919.

130. TC AR 1918, 26; TC AR 1919, 26; TC minutes 1918-19, *passim*.

131. TC ARs 1916-21; S. Lewenhak, 'Women in the leadership of the Scottish Trades Union Congress 1897 - 1970', SLHSJ 7, 1973, 14.



Workers, this was a matter of principle. They demanded the Clerks be reprimanded. The Trades Council would clearly do this only after much persuasion, if at all; it therefore invited both parties' executives to a conference. This was a final insult to the Rubber Workers:

after considerable discussion [at their branch meeting] it was ... unanimously agreed to decline to meet the National Union of Clerks Executive, as we were the injured party and we as a Union cease to be affiliated to the Trades Council owing to their failure to protect our interests. 132

The greater ability of the Clerks to create institutional links allowed them to emerge unscathed from a situation in which they had acted without scruple. Yet the ability to create and use institutions in this way may be seen as but a low level in a ranking of institutional mobilisation. The Rubber Workers, internally, had created one important institution in the appointment of shop stewards and accident stewards: it is likely, however, that these were largely confined in their activity to the collection of dues and dispensing benefit.<sup>133</sup>

So the organisational development of the trade union movement was hindered, in part, by the sheer scale of the administrative tasks imposed by its very success in recruitment. But there was a second reason: the concept of 'organisation' available, at least within the mainstream of the trade union movement. We argued in chapter 5 that the metaphors of work organisation used by management were, in the main, mechanical and military; and that this limited the extent to which managerial strategies relying on some workers' responsibility could be developed. For the unions' activists, the position was not dissimilar. Their illustrations of organisation also drew on mechanical and military analogies: the union should be an 'effective weapon';<sup>134</sup> the great claim of those who created the Trades and Labour

132. NAUL No 292 branch minutes, 4 September 1919; cp TC minutes, 9 September 1919.

133. NAUL No 292 branch minutes, 15 May 1917, 14 May 1918, 29 January 1920.

134. TC AR 1919, 5.

Council was to

have succeeded in producing a machine  
... capable of giving adequate expression  
to the aims, the hopes and the  
aspirations of the working class of this  
city. 135

The problem with this 'nuts and bolts' understanding was that it treated organisation as an instrument, rather than as a relationship.<sup>136</sup> In reality, of course, organisation itself required constant legitimisation, and yet was a vital element in shaping an issue, and thus in mobilising union members. In short, the concept of organisation as a machine left activists as 'mechanics', in some sense external to the machine - its operators: the generals in an army whose will to fight could be taken for granted.

This mechanistic image of organisation was also constrained by the tendency to see administration as the fundamental aspect of organisation. Within a year of its formation, for example, the Trades and Labour Council felt in need 'of fully equipping our machinery with cash and staff';<sup>137</sup> a year later it believed that it

would never be able to give the maximum assistance to the Working-Class Movement locally until the present system of spare-time officials is superseded by a more progressive method. 138

This 'more progressive method' was nothing more grand than the appointment of a full-time Secretary:<sup>139</sup> We have seen above how important quite basic administrative tasks were to a union organisation based on voluntary, spare-time labour; such efficiency, of course, had a bearing on the legitimacy of union organisation itself. When a shop steward at the Victoria rubber works lost 52s. of union money (nearly a week's wage for one of his members) it was important to raise a subscription not merely to recover the money, but because 'it would strengthen the bona fide nature of the case.'<sup>140</sup> (Not infrequent

135. TC AR 1920, 13.

136. This view of organisation has much in common with the social democratic (what Macintyre terms the Labour Socialist) conception of the State: cp S. Macintyre, A Proletarian Science. Marxism in Britain 1917-1933 (Cambridge 1980), 177-80.

137. TC AR 1921, 9.

138. The T&LC sent its affiliates a circular to this effect on 7 Dec. 1921: TC AR 1922, 8.

139. Ibid., 11.

140. NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 29 January 1920.



complaints at the ineffectiveness of full-time union officers should be seen in this light also.) But to see union organisation primarily in terms of administrative (or mechanical) analogies hindered the development of thought about the role of organisation in, and its relation to, the mobilisation of union members and institutions.

In the years before 1921 the effect of these weaknesses could pass unnoticed. Solidarity could be assumed. Failings could be explained in terms of failing in organisation - organisation as it was then understood - or in terms of betrayal. Or both.

## 7.5 'Fighting on the defensive', 1921-1927

The good times did not last long after the war: as early as the spring of 1920 the Trades Council was sounding a note of warning.

During the war period the average worker has become lulled to a sense of security by the comparative ease with which increases of wages and improvement of conditions have been obtained, but signs are not wanting that the employing classes have been strengthening their position, and are marshalling their forces for the great struggle which is undoubtedly imminent. 141

A year later, this 'prophecy [had] ... indeed, come true': 'A struggle has begun, the rules of which are the laws of the jungle',<sup>142</sup> During subsequent years the struggle ebbed and flowed, but real trade union achievement was rare. So successive Trades Council annual reports moved from recognising the 'extraordinary difficulty'<sup>143</sup> the movement was facing (and the defeats suffered) in 1921-1922; to stressing<sup>the</sup> heroism of the struggles, the loyalty and example in defeat.

141. TC AR 1920, 5.

142. TC AR 1921, 5-6.

143. TC AR 1922, 4.

Our explanation for this deterioration in the trade union position concentrates on, firstly, the changes which occurred in the principles by which actions could be legitimated (in this section) and, secondly, the effect of developments within the trade union movement at the level of organisation (section 7.6). Of course, we should bear in mind that the terrain on which these struggles were fought out had changed to the disadvantage of workers in relation to their employers.

Let us turn, first, to the legitimising principles by which trade union action in the working class interest could be justified. We have argued, of course, that these were unusually wide during 1917-1920, notably because of the impetus given to notions associated with planning during wartime, because they were in many cases supported by important central institutions of the wider society, such as the press and the military, - or, if not supported, at least given space by these. More important, perhaps, these principles found some resonance within the workplace. Clearly, our assumption is that the balance of legitimation shifted significantly away from the working class (or, at least, away from trade unions) after 1920. But this requires further elaboration: several aspects will be examined.

First, the institutional support for certain aspects of trade union activities or objectives, especially in important sections of the press, rapidly evaporated during the early post-war years. The press had never, of course, been supportive of trade unions; but, as we have seen, for just a few years they shared certain assumptions. Whilst in 1919 and early 1920 trade unions had been able to enlist newspapers' support, and to 'rouse' public opinion, in some disputes, this seems rapidly to have dissipated.<sup>144</sup>

144. It should be stressed that trade union activists never imagined the press to be favourable. As early as March 1919 the TC protested at the 'present active anti Trades Union campaign being conducted by a certain section of the Scottish Press....' (Minutes, 11 March 1919). What is significant is the constant assertion that the situation was unfair, and deteriorating.



The Press that pled with such sweet  
reason for Whitley Councils and  
Conciliation when the sword was in  
the hand of the Trade Unions, today  
urges the mine-owners to be relentless ...

complained the Trades Council in 1921;<sup>145</sup> while a year later rather  
than supporting the just demands of labour,

The millionaire-owned press has now  
changed its headlines and leaders to  
read that Britain is a poor country  
with limited economic resources ....<sup>146</sup>

This refrain continued through the remainder of our period;

Secondly, the relationship between trade unions and the  
government altered. The recognition of trade unionism implicit in  
joint consultation, 'Whitleyism', and the National Industrial  
Conference disappeared with

the Government's rapid loss of interest  
when participation ceased to hold out  
any promise of aiding employers both  
through its own failure and with the  
tightening grip of recession which  
obviated that requirement.<sup>147</sup>

This did not, of course, mean an end to governmental recognition of  
trade unions; but the character of the recognition changed. We have  
seen that in 1919 and 1920 the government's intent was to divide  
responsible leaders from various - apparently revolutionary - elements:  
shop stewards, industrial unionists, and the like, represented an  
illegitimate and unacceptable form of trade unionism. From 1920 the  
definition of illegitimacy expanded as the strength of all forms of  
union action waned. All strikes - indeed, any form of union action  
likely to prove effective - were no longer to be countenanced:

the employers have been, either openly  
or secretly, assisted by a Government  
which, while proclaiming its impartiality

145. TC AR 1921, 6.

146. TC AR 1922, 4. On the general attitudes of the popular press  
in this period, cp. M. Cowling, The Impact of Labour 1920-1924.  
The beginning of modern British politics (Cambridge 1971), esp.  
45-59; on Governmental relations with (and use of) the press,  
see Middlemas, esp. 153-4; Foster, British Imperialism, 32-4, 36-7.

147. H. Ramsay, 'Cycles of control', 488.

and its 'inability to take sides', has placed the full weight of the machinery of the State against the comparatively mild demands of organised Labour. 148

At another level, whilst trade union justices of the peace were not stripped of their offices, their role was narrowed. With the employers' offensive, arbitration was no longer so desirable (or necessary) from their point of view: arbitrators who were trade unionists must have seemed particularly inappropriate. Trade union JPs were, therefore, confined to the bench. At the same time, it seems no longer to have been so important to appoint trade unionists.<sup>149</sup> In short, 'recognition' was conferred not so much on trade unions as such, but rather on certain (narrower) definitions of trade union activity.

At the same time, thirdly, the memory of certain legitimising principles (particularly those deriving from the war) became ever more

148. TC AR 1922,4; cp Middlemas, 158-61.

149. Between 1920 and 1927, only one Trades and Labour Council official became a JP : Peter Herd (AEU, East branch), its Assistant Secretary (and later Secretary) in 1922 or 1923. The names of 'Working-Class Justices of the Peace' were recorded in TC ARs from 1922:

Working Class Justices of the Peace

<u>Year</u>	<u>No.ofJPs</u>	<u>No. of JPs who were:</u>	
		current or former councillors or parish councillors	identifiably trade union officials
1922	12	5	5
1923	18	6	7
1924	18	6	7
1925	20	6	8
1926	20	6	8
1927	20	6	8

Other avenues to the justices' bench seem to have been through the Co-operative movement and bodies such as the Education Authority.



distant. Many were re-interpreted in the light of new conditions and events, particularly those terms which were associated with the economy. We examined in section 7.2 the strength of the language of organisation and planning, and the erosion of the profit motive, during the war. A result was that certain legitimising principles (such as efficiency), which had previously been closely associated in meaning with notions of profit, now became more closely associated with notions of organisation and planning. This was particularly true in industrial contexts. Now, after the war, state control over the economy was rapidly abandoned, and companies, broadly speaking, returned to traditional objectives in a market context.<sup>150</sup> This put the meanings of efficiency and its associated principles under pressure. This was increased as press campaigns against 'waste' developed.<sup>151</sup> Employers and managers had in any case been less wholehearted about the organisational benefits of war, often interpreting it more in terms of interference and inefficiency.

There are several indications that the meaning of these terms shifted. The notion of 'profiteering', for instance, which had been common currency in wartime, became more rare, and played but a small part in explanations of industrial and other developments. To return to an example used earlier, in 1919 the Co-operative movement reminded Trade unionists that it was still

the sworn enemy of profiteering in any shape or form, and for that reason alone deserves their warmest support. <sup>152</sup>

By 1920 awareness of separate class interest remained in the claim that

The financial and other benefits which are inseparable from CO-OPERATIVE TRADING make an irresistible appeal to all who find it necessary to economise. Only people who have plenty of the world's goods can afford to be outside this helpful movement <sup>153</sup>

150. Cp R.H.Tawney, 'The abolition of economic controls, 1918-21', Econ.Hist.Rev. 13, 1943, 1-30; P. Abrams, 'The failure of social reform, 1918-20', Past & Present 24, 1963, 42-64; Lowe 'The erosion of state intervention in Britain', 270-86.

151. On the press, 'waste', 'efficiency and economy', cp Cowling, esp. 51-2, 55-8.

152. TC AR 1919, 4. Emphasis in original.

153. TC AR 1920, 12. Capitalisation in original.

but the force of 'profiteering' no longer seemed important. And indeed, the word hardly appears in trade union minutes, reports or publications after 1919.<sup>154</sup> This meant that a commonsense explanation of economic development, which had strong emotive content and was supported by powerful established institutions, was no longer commonly available.

The effect of the loss of these legitimising principles can be illustrated by examining the changing language used by negotiators in the engineering industry. Where in 1919 and early 1920 the unions' negotiators could argue in terms of their members' feelings (and win their case, very often), from 1920 this became more difficult. The employers now held the trump card: the state of the economy. The argument was not, of course, new: it was the stock-in-trade of employers in negotiations, well-known - and understood - by their union counterparts. It was used, to be sure, in 1919 and 1920: but in those months it was both weakened by the war, and outweighed by the unions' confidence.<sup>155</sup> Thus we find a reversal in methods of negotiation. In 1919 the union negotiators tend to deploy a simple case, based essentially on their ability to mobilise their members (though often

154. Perhaps the sole exception is in a somewhat theoretical discussion of employment in TC AR 1921, 5: 'Capital interest is being paid from a camel's hump, begot of artificial prosperity and profiteering, while unemployment stands sombre and foreboding over every worker's home.' Even here, however, profiteering clearly refers back to an earlier period.

155. Cp ESAE&I and ASE, Local Conference Proceedings, 'Marine Repairs (Shore and marine engineers)', 30 April 1920, in which the union accepted that 'if we were to take up a stiff-necked attitude ... the [ship] owner will naturally say, "we are not going to Leith, we will send them [their ships] to where we will get them repaired without trouble." ' But other principles outweighed this: argument drew on the quality of work done (the question was whether repairs to ships' engines should be carried out by ships' or shore engineers), precedent, the categories of work involved in relation to the expertise of the parties, the need to share work equitably. Above all, however, the union won because of its claim, evidently believed, that its members were incensed, and that its threat to suspend work was not an idle one.



interwoven with other assertions); the employers generally introduce other principles in an attempt to confuse the issue - or, at least, to provide the trappings of relevant and reasoned judgement. Rules should not be altered in 1919 because it would be 'panic legislation' in 'abnormal conditions'; apprentices' pay should not be too high because 'there are evil influences at work' on such boys; some issues are too 'big' to be dealt with locally; 'political argument' should be kept out of industrial negotiation; 'order and ruling' are desirable, 'constant confusion and trouble' (allegedly the result of workplace negotiations) are to be shunned.<sup>156</sup>

From 1920 the employers could deploy a simple case: that they were all, employers and employees, subject to the exigencies of a market over which there was no control. Work was not 'plentiful', trade was 'slack': the consequences, though regrettable, were inescapable. The argument came in several forms: from mild reminders ('the trade ... has fallen upon bad times'),<sup>157</sup> through strong reminders ('we do not think we are pressing hard at all, but only fighting to get back to a level [of pay] where we can make our jobs attractive to the buyers'),<sup>158</sup> to outright threats:

I think most men who have a job, and a steady job, are very happy just now, and any of them who have contracts are very pleased and there is no change ... that is going to better the conditions 159

- thus one employer in 1923; while another, in 1925, averred:

It is that time and quarter that is just driving work across the other side of the water. It makes things impossible. 160

The union representatives, in contrast, drew on a wider range of legitimising principles. Parity ('in all districts where brass moulders

156. These examples are drawn from ESAE&I and ASE, Local Conference Proceedings, 'In re Engineers Working Rules' 19 Sept. 1919, 9, 11, 15, 31, 37.

157. ESAE&I and AEU and SBU Local Conference Proceedings, 'Brass Moulders' rates - levelling up to iron moulders', 4 April 1921, 8.

158. ESAE&I and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Outworking Allowances', 22 January 1923, 3.

159. Ibid., 23.

160. E&AE(EofS) and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Allowances for repair work on Diesel, Semi-Diesel and Oil Internal Combustion Engines', 23 October 1925, 29.

and iron moulders are working the principle is generally admitted - that the rates should be paid practically the same');<sup>161</sup> precedent ('the principle was recognised in July of last year'),<sup>162</sup> the 'effort bargain' ('it is far more unhealthy work than that of an iron moulder, and the brass moulders' work is just as exhaustive'):<sup>163</sup> These could be effective in securing marginal or sectional improvements, but rarely when an employer resisted resolutely, for they were of relatively narrow application.

The unions continued to use, on occasion, the broader principles on which they had earlier mobilised so effectively (such as wartime promises), but to little effect: the principles themselves had never been accepted by the employers - and now they no longer mobilised union members. In a revealing exchange in January 1923, the employers show a quiet confidence in the workers' quiescence:

The CHAIRMAN: You will ... perhaps adjourn and ... discuss what are your real proposals in connection with Clause 6 on the country allowance, because we certainly cannot go to the length of [raising it from 4/- to] 5/- per day.

Mr. STUART [AEU]: Then, I do not think there is much use in our coming back. That is the last word we had on it with the men.

The CHAIRMAN: But the last word is that the men are working at 4/- ....<sup>164</sup>

To Stuart's assertion that 'We are not here to bluff you on this matter', the Chairman responded, 'Well, I do not know what word you put upon it, but ....'<sup>165</sup> He would not move beyond 4/-; he knew he did not have to.

161. ESAE&I and AEU and SBU, Local Conference Proceedings, 'Brass-moulders' rates -levelling up to iron moulders', 4 April 1921, 3.

162. Ibid.

163. Ibid.

164. ESAE&I and AEU Local Conference Proceedings 'in re Outworking Allowances,' 22 January 1923, 16.

165. Ibid.



For the employers, moreover, 'the market' could undercut almost any argument the unions could produce, and justify almost any move by management. It could even explain why unions could not be informed about the state of trade: 'we never see these cuts [in the price of gas-meters sold] and never get any proof of them,' complained an AEU man in 1922. The employers' chairman retorted

I assure you it is done, but we cannot go on revealing all our business to Tom, Dick and Harry because it gets abroad and spoils trade. 166

The union could not longer win the argument. Toward the end of our period, it even attempted to argue for increased wages by using the employers' own argument in reverse: because there had been a 'definite improvement in trade'.<sup>167</sup> This was forlorn, for having accepted the premise of the employers' case, the union could not escape: the logic of their riposte: 'we should be perfectly justified ... to ask you to help us to get work by reducing further the [wage] costs.'<sup>168</sup>

The fourth aspect of the shift in the balance of legitimation is crucial. The economic downturn changed the nature of the issues confronting trade union organisations. Where the problems of 1917-1920, notably inflation, had been very amenable to solution by union activity at the workplace, the problems of depression were not. Whilst employers were operating in a profitable environment, whilst their major aim was to win back lost markets, whilst the post-war boom lasted, union action could win concessions with relative ease. When the markets began to disappear, when the relative cost of employing workers rose, when profit margins contracted, workplace organisation could achieve less. The distance between hope and realistic expectation thus grew; and, in due time, hopes were either dashed or adjusted downward. Whilst unions were conscious of unemployment (either because

166. ESAE&I and AEU, Conference Proceedings, 'Proposed reduction of 12½ per cent on piecework prices of brass finishers and brass moulders in Gas Meter making works', 20 July 1923, 9.

167. E&AE(EofS)A and AEU, Adjourned Local Conference Proceedings, 'in re Local application for 20/- per week increase in wages', 22 April 1926, 12.

168. Ibid., 14.

their members were out of work, or because their memberships were declining),<sup>169</sup> they could do little about it. Their members were increasingly hard to mobilise, and it was still harder to mobilise them successfully, since success now generally required action at an industrial - rather than sectional or workplace - level. The scale of action required had escalated greatly; the possible benefits from action had become smaller, or at least more distant.

Many employers, of course, attempted to use the depression to tighten their control over labour - to require closer supervision, faster work, and so on. This generated issues which were relevant to union organisation and illustrates two important points. Firstly, the existence of the issues did not mean that union action could achieve the improvements desired. The gas meter making firms, for instance, in 1922 determined to reduce their piecework rates. This was an issue, as an AEU representative pointed out, on which the men's expressed view was unambiguous:

we had a very representative meeting of the whole of the gas meter making shops in the city ..., and the men instructed me to point out that the 12½ per cent reduction that you propose is totally unwarranted. 170

But the unions had recently been defeated in the national lock-out, and the negotiations were almost ritualistic: the employers had an answer to every argument - 'to get prices down to increase business and induce managers to order more meters.'<sup>171</sup> Secondly, 1917-1920 had

169. Cp, e.g., NUR Edin No. 1 branch minutes 29 January 1922, when a continuing fall in membership'which was accounted [for] by the number of dismissals &c' was reported; within the AEU, 8 per cent were unemployed in April 1926 (Thomas Dewar, in E&AE(EofS) and AEU Adjourned Local Conference Proceedings 'in re local application for 20/- per week increase in wages!', 22 April 1926, 6.

170. ESAE&I and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings, 'Proposed reduction of 12½ per cent on piecework prices of brass finishers and brass moulders, in Gas Meter making works', 20 July 1922, 3.

171. Ibid., 11.



been marked not only by the existence of issues amenable to improvement through workplace action: it had also been a period when widely available legitimising principles were seen to be relevant to these issues and methods. During the 'twenties this was no longer so: indeed, 'commonsense' seemed to support the employers' interpretations of economic necessity. On no occasion, before 1926, did an engineers' negotiator attempt to criticise the economic assumptions of the employers case for limiting or reducing wage costs.

#### 7.6 Trade unionism and organisation, 1921 - 1927

Broadly, then, the political 'space' which had been created in the brief period around the armistice closed quite rapidly as the post-war boom passed. Of course, it might have been possible for labour organisations themselves to create or support legitimising principles, to sustain this 'space' of themselves: this did not happen. During 1919 and 1920 the scale of the task of creating union organisation, together with the understanding of organisation which existed among union activists and members, had meant that union workplace organisation developed with an administrative, rather than a 'political' - in the sense of mobilising - orientation. This played a part in determining the nature of the union activity in subsequent years. In this section we explore the development of union organisation (and organisational thinking) after 1920, and we discuss some of its implications.

We have seen that union organisational thought in the immediate post-war years was marked by mechanistic and military images, and by the immediate imperatives of efficient internal administration. One consequence was that the movement failed to address the relationship of union institutions to their members. For, on the one hand, union organisation was apparently working, as increasing membership made plain;

whilst, on the other, the influx of new members and the existence of mobilising issues at the workplace was creating, informally, a highly decentralised, quasi-organic, structure. The latter, however, developed largely unplanned; a corollary of multi-unionism, and growth from the grass roots.

As the depression set in, the context in which union organisational structures functioned changed. The intensity of the depression, and the rapidity of its onset, were reflected in union

Table 7.3 Trade Union Membership 1918 - 1927

Year	<u>Total union membership</u> (thousands)	<u>Membership of TUC-affiliated unions:</u>		
		<u>Total</u> (thousands)	<u>Change from previous year</u> (thousands)	<u>(per cent)</u>
1918	6533	5284	+752	+16.6
1919	7926	6505	+1221	+23.1
1920	8348	6418	-87	- 1.3
1921	6633	5129	- 1289	-20.1
1922	5625	4369	- 760	-14.8
1923	5429	4328	- 41	- 0.1
1924	5544	4351	+ 23	+ 0.0
1925	5506	4366	+ 15	+ 0.0
1926	5219	4164	- 202	- 4.6
1927	4919	3875	- 289	- 6.9

Source: Bain, Bacon and Pimlott, in Halsey (ed.), 123-6.

membership. The national figures are shown in table 7.3: as a gauge of the decline, membership of TUC-affiliated unions fell by 32.6 per cent over the three year period beginning in December 1919. We only have membership figures for one Edinburgh union organisation over this period. The decline in its membership over the same period was almost identical, at 32.3 per cent. (See figure 7.4.) The number of union branches affiliated to the Trades Council fell from 95 to 70 in just one year, 1920-1921 (see figure 7.5); financial pressure caused by loss of membership and unemployment was an important reason. The Painters reported between 180 and 200 of its 1200 members idle in November 1920;<sup>172</sup> the following year the orchestras cut back, causing

172. TC minutes, 16 November 1920.



'large unemployment' among the Musicians' members;<sup>173</sup> the Penicuik branch of the Printing and Paper Workers withdrew from the Council because trade depression was affecting branch income.<sup>174</sup>

But the depression's impact on union organisation was uneven. There were problems in integrating newly unionised workers into union institutions, and new union institutions into the existing organisational structures of the trade union movement. Three aspects deserve discussion. Firstly, involvement in union activity by union members did not change significantly during the year after the war. Among the Railwaymen the mean number voting at meetings (the only available indicator) only rose as a proportion of membership as the latter began to fall in 1920 (see figure 7.4). So the (quantitative) increase in union membership was not accompanied by a (qualitative) change in the meaning of union membership. Participation in union meetings declined by 47 per cent as a proportion of membership between the winter of 1920-21 and the summer of 1923, despite the fact that the falls in the number of new members, and in total branch membership, had been stemmed between six and eighteen months earlier. Although participation rose again, it never rivalled the proportions of 1918-1920.

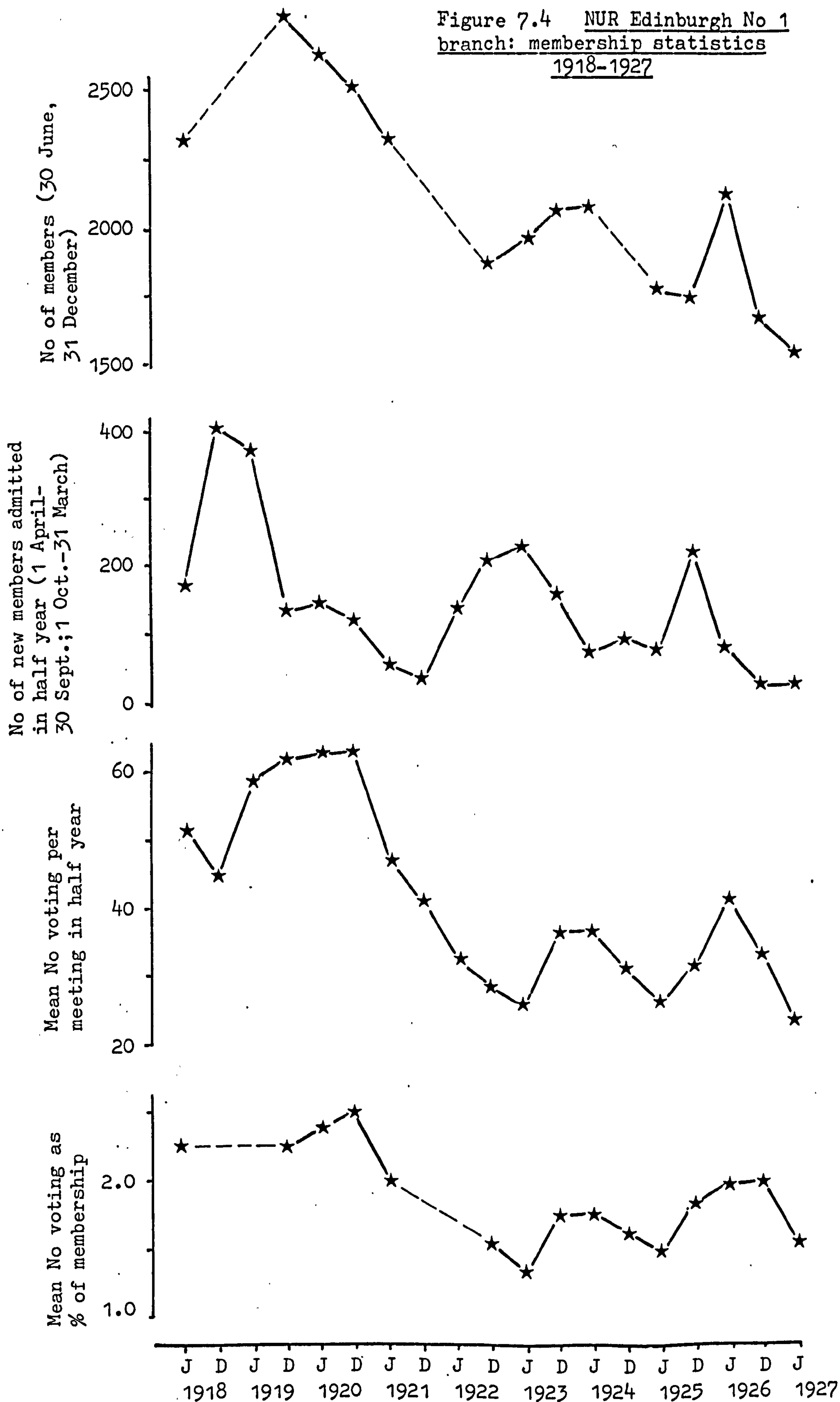
Turning, secondly, to the Trades Council, we can see in figure 7.5 that when the number of organisations affiliated to the Council, and their size, were greatest, each delegate attended the fewest meetings, and the average attendance at each meeting was lowest. In short, the infusion of new members into the movement in 1919 and 1920 could not be consolidated in organisation, attitudes or behaviour. After 1921, the number of Trades Council affiliates began to rise, but the membership of affiliated organisations (reflected, if approximately, in the number of delegates) never reached the 1920 level. The level of activity of the average delegate, as represented by the number of meetings attended, never again approached its levels of 1915-1918.

Thirdly, union branches new to the movement formed the bulk of those which ceased affiliation to the Trades and Labour Council in 1921.

173. TC minutes, 28 June 1921.

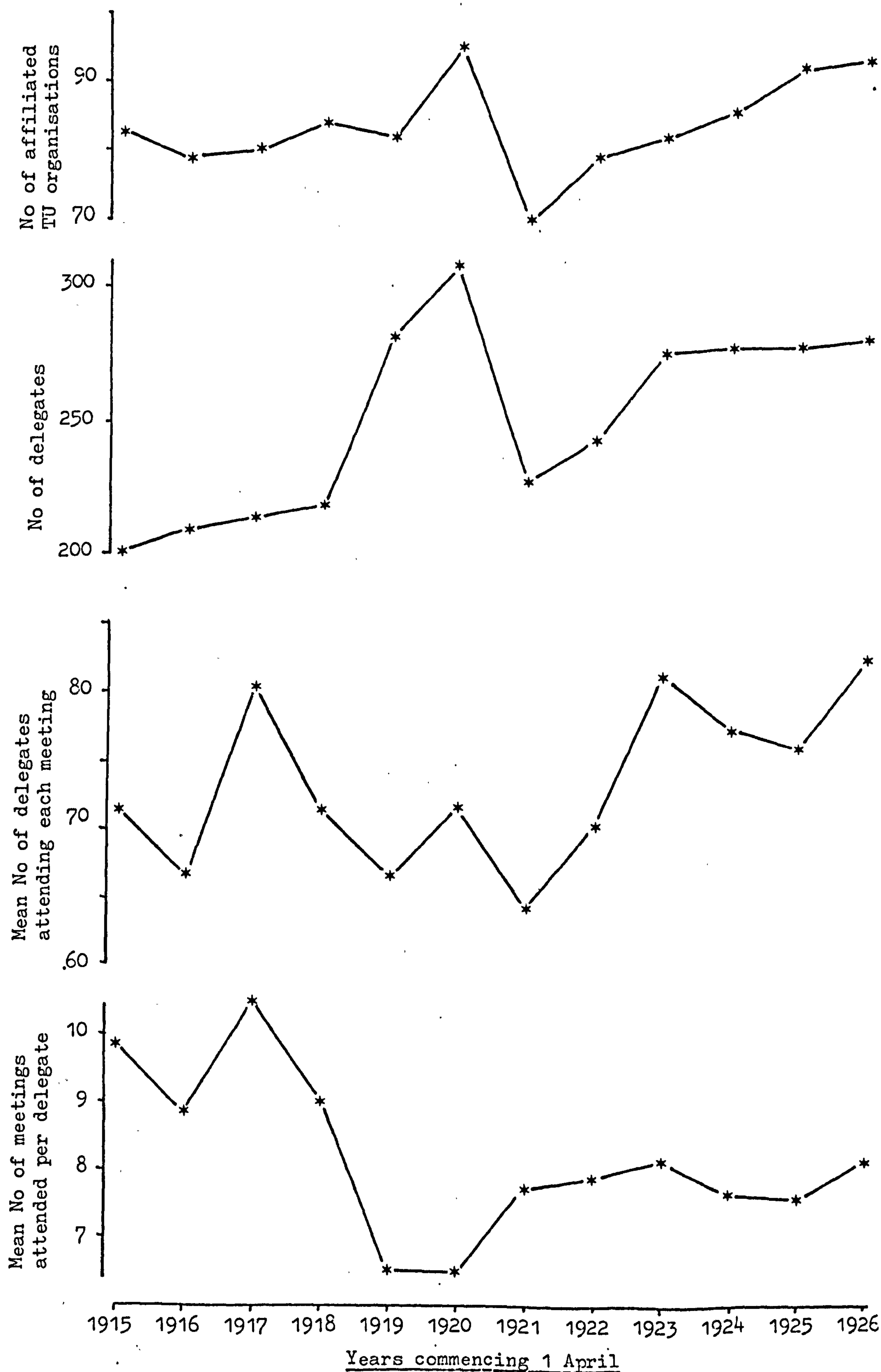
174. TC minutes, 1 November 1921.

Figure 7.4 NUR Edinburgh No 1  
branch: membership statistics  
1918-1927



Source: NUR No 1 branch minutes, passim.





Source: TC. and T&LC ARs, 1916-1927.

(See table 7.6; it was in this year that the number of Council affiliates fell the most.) Of the sixteen unions which had affiliated since 1915, a majority was made up of unions in the

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Table 7.6      Trade union branches which ceased to be affiliated to  
Edinburgh Trades Council 1920-21

Branches not affiliated to Edinburgh Trades Council in 1915:

Asylum workers (Morningside)  
National Union of Clerks (Engineering)  
Electrical Trades Union (North)  
Electrical Trades Union (Cinema Operators)  
General Workers (Meter)  
General Workers (Tobacco)  
General Workers (Drug)  
Gold, Silver and Allied Trades  
Pottery Workers (Portobello)  
Prudential Staff Federation  
Railwaymen (Edin No.3)  
Scale, Beam and Weighing Machine Makers.  
Woodworkers (Amalgamated No.4)  
Woollen Workers  
Workers' Union (No.2)  
16 Workers' Union (Musselburgh)

Branches not affiliated to Edinburgh Trades Council in 1915;  
possibly then affiliated to Leith Trades Council:

National Amalgamated Union of Labour (Leith)  
Corporation Employees (Leith)  
Machinemen (Leith)  
Painters (Leith)  
Shipwrights  
Tailors and Tailoresses (Leith)  
7 Woodworkers (Leith No.2)

Branches affiliated to Edinburgh Trades Council in 1915:

Electrical Trades Union (West)  
Farm Servants (Dairyworkers)  
Furnishing Trades  
4 Tramway and Vehicle Workers

Sources: Edin. TC & T&LC ARs, 1916, 1921, 1922.

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'growth sectors': semi- and unskilled workers, white-collar workers, and so on. Overall, therefore, it was among the more recently organised workers, and unions, that organisation was weakest, and most



liable to erosion; but the trade union movement as a whole found it difficult to sustain the level of membership participation in its affairs that had characterised the war years.

After 1920, then, the unions' inability to consolidate their gains of 1917-20 began to be exposed; at the same time, the context in which they operated altered. There consequently developed, (alongside a debate about strategy), intense discussion of certain organisational questions. The major problem was identified as the inability of unions to hold their own against an alliance of employers and government:

When it has come to meeting the attacks of those whose interests lie in the maintenance of the status quo, or in reaction, the Trade Union Movement, fighting on the defensive, has been out-generalled and out manoeuvred, and the combined weight of the employers' attack has been felt by separate sections at different times. 175.

This analysis seems to have been shared widely: locally, but also nationally. The proposed solution was reflected in the title of a special conference on 'Hours, Wages, Unemployment, and Co-ordination'.<sup>176</sup> If the problem had been disunity in action, the solution, clearly, was to co-ordinate.

Yet whilst the perceived problem had changed from the earlier period, the solution was found in the same essential conception of organisation. With diminishing memberships, efficient branch administration was no longer a key issue, but the image of organisation remained mechanistic: hierarchical and militaristic. We see this in the language of the Special Conference resolution. 'Complete co-ordination of policy is necessary within the trade union movement,'

175. T&LC AR 1922, 4.

176. T&LC minutes, 4 March 1923: the Conference was attended by about 150 delegates.

it declared, setting out steps to be taken locally 'to assist National Unions and the Trade[s] Union Congress to this end.'<sup>177</sup> Indeed in the debate on union organisation, all drew on conceptual assumptions which saw organisation in mechanistic images. There are two main problems with this approach. One we know: its tendency to divorce organisational questions from those of legitimising mobilisation. The assumption was that sectionalism, for instance, was an organisational problem which co-ordination could solve. The second problem is related: such a model of organisation can be effective in some circumstances only. To employ the military metaphor, it may be appropriate to using a well-motivated army in a 'war of manoeuvre', when the objectives are clearly specified and attainable. (Thus it provided the basis for local strike committee organisation in 1926, which has so impressed many historians.)<sup>178</sup> But the 'army' after 1920 was not well-motivated: its morale was low; its willingness to take action could not be assumed. In short, the concept of organisation available tended to conceal the relationship between organisation and the legitimation of action. Instead, it laid stress on the direction of action: it emphasised tactics at the expense of strategy.

Of course, as the depression - with its accompanying problems in mobilisation - became more entrenched, an awareness of other problems developed. A 'Trade Union Organising Committee' established by the Trades and Labour Council at the end of 1922, for instance,

acted on the principle not only that it was necessary to get Non-Unionists into Unions, but that a working class consciousness should be created. 179

This was no small task, and similar statements echoed plaintively through the succeeding years: 'If Trade Unionism is expected to kill

177. T&LC minutes 18 March 1923: the Conference had been adjourned from a fortnight earlier to debate this, its last, motion.

178. The most well-known example is the organisation chart of the Methil Council of Action, first cited in E. Burns, General Strike 1926. Trades Councils in Action (London 1926), which also includes other examples. On similar developments in Edinburgh cp I. MacDougall, 'Edinburgh with some notes on the Lothians and Fife' in J. Skelley (ed.), The General Strike, 1926 (London 1976), esp. 148-9.

179. T&LC minutes, 16 December 1922.



poverty and assist in uplifting mankind, there must be solidarity'.<sup>180</sup> Yet the tendency was to distinguish organisation from propaganda, but to view the latter simply as one task to be executed by the former. An example of this is the 'Back to the Unions' campaign of 1923: initiated by the TUC with a self-explanatory purpose, it was pursued in Edinburgh by a series of public and works-gate meetings, demonstrations and marches, with handbills, posters, and rejoining forms. Yet the campaign made no recommendations about union behaviour, let alone union structure, although it was necessary to set up ad hoc committees (of district union officials, and on organising women) to run it - perhaps implicit recognition of the inadequacy of existing institutions for the tasks now necessary.<sup>181</sup>

There was some debate which confronted the possibility of a link between organisational structure and the attitudes and actions of union members. It did not arise until late in our period. It was, in addition, a debate which occurred within the bounds established by the available notions of organisation. Whilst there began to be an awareness that

For the successful work of the Trade Unions, understanding and performing their work is not enough; special knowledge, tact, and ability are the essentials,

this was to be 'combined with a disciplined sense of confidence in the authoritative decisions of a local or national General Council. The tendency towards amalgamation in the Trade Union world is in the right direction'.<sup>182</sup> In short, notions of hierarchy and discipline continued to rule supreme. The two main sources of criticism illustrate this. The first drew on the tradition of industrial unionism, and was well-put in an article in The Labour Standard:

180. T&LC AR 1925, 15.

181. T& LC minutes, 8 May 1923, 15 May 1923.

182. T&LC AR 1924, 13.

A policy of scientific amalgamation is needed. . Not the haphazard amalgamation which consists in knocking two or three unions into one, regardless of whether the financial product is a homogeneous whole, but amalgamation on industrial lines, so that there may be one union for each industry, in which will be organised all the workers of that industry - manual, clerical, technical and administrative. When we see the necessity for sinking sectional differences and interests, and organising on these lines, we will have taken a tremendous step in the direction of workers' control of industry. 183

Thus even the industrial unionists, so closely allied in basic thinking to syndicalism, attempted to change union organisation only to another version of mechanistic structure. The second source of criticism likewise came from the left. It did stress the importance of decentralising decision-making to local trades councils and the like. Yet there was no attempt to explore the relationship between organisation and the legitimation of action, and - if anything - the authority of the localised committee was to be even more absolute. The view is perhaps most clearly put in a conference motion:

That this conference agrees to endeavour to co-ordinate all sections of the working classes locally. No one section of workers to act independently of any others, but submit all questions to a Central Committee appointed by this Conference, which shall act in conjunction with the Trades Council for the purpose of defending all the interests of the Working Class. 184

How was it that such images of organisation continued to be important in the 'twenties? Two inter-related factors should be discussed. The first is the development of organisational thinking

183. Labour Standard 10 October 1925: 'A Hundred Per Cent Trade Union Organisation'.

184. T&LC minutes, 18 March 1922: trades councils' roles may have been stressed as a likely source of alternative (leftist) policies, rather than from a principled attempt to decentralise.



outside the trade unions: the second is the development of certain aspects of industrial relations.

We shall mention two aspects of the development of organisational thinking outside the trade unions: management thought, and political thought especially within the labour movement. Managerial images of organisation were strongly influenced by analogies with machines, weapons and armies; but whilst there was a 'thrust for efficiency' during and after the war, this did not necessarily mean a move simplistically in the direction of 'scientific management'. Rather, 'efficiency' could be achieved in a variety of ways, the success of each of which was determined largely by its context. Nevertheless, the managerial mood of the 'twenties shifted toward tighter control of work, closer discipline, and more centralised, hierarchical, decision-making. These were the years when Taylorism began to acquire institutional backing in Britain as consultants applying versions of Taylor's methods were set up: the best-known, Charles E. Bedaux Ltd., in 1926.<sup>185</sup> There was, in short, little in management thinking which would provide a basis for the type of critique of trade union organisation and methods we have discussed.

Within the labour movement, contributions to thinking about organisation came largely from the political side. The formation of the Communist Party during 1920 and 1921 highlights the process by which the syndicalist tradition, which had been an important element in wartime shop stewards movements, was integrated into a 'political' organisation, losing much of its contribution to trade union debate in the process. The Communist Party also rapidly adopted a view of the Russian Revolution which stressed the importance of Bolshevik organisation in 1917: almost inevitably, this led to a concentration on the importance of hierarchical centralist organisation in trade unions also. The Labour Party was in the process of re-organisation into a national, membership organisation in which formal

185. Brown, Sabotage, 231; on the Bedaux system, see Brown, 231-51, P. Livingstone, 'Stop the Stop Watch', New Society 10 July 1969, M. Jenkins 'Time and Motion Strike. Manchester 1934-1937', Our History, 60, 1974.

control was centralised.<sup>186</sup> After 1918 (indeed, also before) there was no critique of organisation which could have threatened the direction being taken within the trade union movement. In fact, perhaps the only source of thought about organisation which might have questioned the approach being taken was guild socialism: but, for a variety of reasons its impact was very limited.

The major factor in sustaining mechanistic union structures, however, is to be found in the development of industrial relations in certain, key, industries. During the 'twenties, there was of course a movement toward national bargaining both in engineering and on the railways. These industries set the pace and tone of industrial relations in the 'twenties;<sup>187</sup> they were also strongly represented in the general institutions of the labour movement, in Edinburgh, such as the Trades and Labour Council. Of course, national bargaining meant something slightly different in each case. But, above all, it regulated: it reduced uncertainty, introducing an element of stability into the framework of decision-making and planning. It did so in several ways. It reduced differences in labour relations practice between firms, areas, or divisions to a minimum (though it could not eliminate them). It meant that, even where disputes occurred, they would do so only after the employer had advance warning, and thus time to prepare. It reduced the danger of disputes that occurred in one firm disrupting the work of others which bought from or sold to it. Agreed national bargaining structures also enabled employers to enlist union leaders' support in certain tasks: most immediately, they became committed to elements of the agreed procedures, to the method and timings for settling disputes; subsequently, they might become committed to the terms of substantive agreements. In short, national bargaining brought order.

186. Cp McKibbin, Evolution of the Labour Party, esp. 91-106.

187. No doubt other industries could be added to a list of 'pace-setters' (e.g., mining): the point here is that these are industries already covered in some depth which were 'pace-setters'.



Employers, of course, had other motives for adopting a national bargaining structure. On the railways, when negotiated in 1921, it may have seemed an unexceptionable quid pro quo for union acceptance of the companies' returning to private ownership. In engineering, inertia was important: a national structure of negotiation - 'procedure' - existed anyway. But it also represented a way of reducing the investment which a firm needed to make in industrial relations expertise, cost, and time.

What were the advantages of national bargaining structures and procedures to trade unions? Clearly national bargaining had certain advantages for unions in common with employers: it reduced the unit costs, particularly in terms of time, of negotiation; it allowed for the development of expertise (though whether this opportunity was exploited is less clear); above all, again, it increased the stability, and reduced the uncertainty, of the bargaining situation. But, in addition, there were apparent advantages to the union rather than the employer. The NUR leaders, for instance, seem to have seen their negotiating machinery agreed in 1921 as a means of preserving some of the gains made during 1919 and 1920, in the face of threatening 'decontrol'.<sup>188</sup> In an industry like engineering, it could be a means of ensuring a basic standard in nearly all firms: 'if that is so then so much the better' was the response of an ASE negotiator when assured that his belief that 'the worse [sic] offenders' in the disputed matter 'do not come under the Federation at all' was incorrect.<sup>189</sup>

One of the advantages of a national negotiating machinery to unions' leaders was the prospect of stabilising external conditions (which had been changing apace for several years) so that the internal affairs of their organisations could be sorted out. Administrative effectiveness was an urgent priority for local union organisations in the years of rapid membership growth; this was so for national unions

188: Bagwell, 408-11.

189. ESAE&I and ASE Local Conference Proceedings, 'Question referred: marine repairs - (Shore and marine engineers)', 30 April 1920, 5.

also. According to one NUR member, for instance, where 38 clerks had been employed at Unity House in 1914, there were 51 in 1920;<sup>190</sup> visiting the Headquarters,

he had found the clerks on the point of revolt, because their claim of a 50 per cent [sic] had been thrown back on them by the EC: who had been told they had refused to work overtime when the truth was they were working excessive hours. 191

There were clearly administrative problems. And, as memberships began to fall after 1920, union leaders faced the problems of managing decline: the need to cut costs, and thus probably to reduce their establishment of officials and staff, whilst having at the same time to cope with the problems generated by the onset of depression.

We now turn to the implications of national negotiations and procedures for union organisation, and images of organisation. The first we have already touched on: if agreements were reached (either substantive or procedural) above plant level, then the leaders who had negotiated them had in some way to ensure their members' compliance with the agreements (or to find some acceptable reason for not doing so).<sup>192</sup> One method, clearly, was only to make agreements which were

190. NUR Edin No. 1 Branch minutes, 28 March 1920: according to another member, who was on the Union's National EC, there were 100 clerks at Head Office in 1920. Between 1914 and 1919 NUR membership grew from 273,362 to 481,081; in 1920 it fell back to 457,836: Bagwell, 699-700.

191. NUR Edin. No. 1 branch minutes, 14 March 1920.

192. The legitimacy of procedure and agreement might be outweighed by other legitimising principles - e.g., members' attitudes, or absurdity - as when an AEU negotiator pointed out that 'our members are very discontent on this question ....[I]t would be very absurd for our men to say, "Oh, wait till a national agreement comes along and we will start the job when it is completed". Yet, that is an analogous position [to the question at issue]'. E&AE (EofS) and AEU, Local Conference Proceedings, 'in re Allowances for repair work on Diesel, Semi-Diesel and Oil Internal Combustion Engines,' 23 October 1925, 43.



assured of members' enthusiastic acceptance: whilst this was difficult even during 1917-20, it became far more so thereafter. Another would have been to persuade the members that an agreement reached was the best possible in the circumstances: it may be that this was easier in depression than in the period of optimism. A third option, however, was to ensure compliance rather than endorsement. This might mean the persuasion of members not by reference to the substantive merits of the agreement, but rather by reference to other principles: unity, loyalty to the union, discipline, and the like. It might, however, mean the coercion of members into compliance, through sanctions of various kinds.

This implied an important shift in the functional focus of union structure: not so much in the purpose for which it was designed, but rather in the activities which seemed most important to union leaders. Whereas in 1917-20 the main function of union structures (in this respect) was to assimilate new members, during the 'twenties their main function became the control of their members; for whereas before 1920 union achievements were likely to commend them to their members, during the later period successes were few. Military commanders are wont to equate morale with discipline. Where motivation failed, discipline could replace it. A straightforward example is to be found in the NUR, where, in the aftermath of the General Strike and the humiliating terms of settlement on the railways,<sup>193</sup> a branch member

in no uncertain manner condemned our  
Leaders for their signing such a  
settlement and then fining our members  
for taking part in the strike. 194

In general, though, this shift in function was reflected in measures to strengthen leadership control at an earlier stage: again, the NUR provides an example in its introduction of extra tests for prospective organisers in 1924.<sup>195</sup>

193. Cp Bagwell, 489-90.

194. NUR Edin. No. 1 Branch minutes, 11 July 1927.

195. Ibid., 23 March 1924.

Unions are, of course, inherently difficult to discipline. They contain important - and formal - elements of legitimate authority at both 'top' and 'bottom', and institutions at lower levels which (to varying degrees) are able to articulate opposition to centralised leaderships. This was very noticeable among the Railwaymen, where branches could be large and strong, and where there was a strong tradition of 'unofficial' organisation. Thus the NUR No. 1 branch conducted a war of words with their National Executive Committee throughout the early '20s (some examples of which we have seen). (Even so, however, the principle of loyalty to the Union could be a strong one, especially where its own members were not involved: so the branch could approve even of the Executive Committee and J.H.Thomas in their action against an 'unconstitutional' strike - it was necessary 'to take every step to safeguard the constitution of our Society'.)<sup>196</sup> It, was, therefore, impossible for this process totally to transform union structures.

This was, of course, the more so as the influence of nationally agreed procedures was felt not only nationally: indeed their essence was just the involvement of union officials (permanent and lay) at all levels. So the Engineers participated in district conferences, the Railwaymen in departmental committees, even though they might doubt their power and effectiveness:<sup>197</sup> in so doing, local activists too came to rely - in part - on the disciplining functions of union structure. Although they might object to the authority of national officers, local activists themselves came partially to rely on union organisation to ensure their agreements were adhered to: there was, in short, no constituency with power to mobilise resources within the unions which did not also have some stake in the way they were organised.

196. Ibid., 29 June 1924.

197. Cp, e.g., the comment of an NUR member 'on the power of these [Departmental] committees [sic] which he had doubts about': ibid., 22 October 1922.



### 7.7 Industry, management and labour

The burden of our argument about the development of trade unionism may be summarised thus. Standard accounts of the development of industry and work organisation direct our attention away from the important short-term changes which occurred during and after the Great War; in their search for fundamental economic trends, they obscure also the extent of diversity and uneven development, both between and within various industrial sectors. Examining the development of four sectors of Edinburgh's economy, we identified a spectrum of responses to the same overall economic conditions. There was no ineluctable trend toward larger scale production and the direct control of labour: indeed, during and just after the war, strategies were adopted which (in various ways) reflected both an accommodation to labour strength, and, at least in relation to certain workers, a reliance upon their technical ability. When the depression came, industrial management did not immediately and inevitably resort to strong forms of direct control. This seems to have been technically feasible only in the larger enterprises (such as the Castle Mills, and the railway companies); even there, the strength of well-established unions could temper it (as on the railways), while the North British Rubber Company learnt that eliminating union strength could also involve costs. The structure of Edinburgh's engineering industry generally hindered the development of large-scale enterprises, and its products placed a heavy reliance on workers' skills. So although the economics of the industry made labour weak, employers could not ignore the unions. In printing, union strength was well-established, and was eroded very little.

In these structural conditions, unions were able to make substantial advances until 1920 or 1921. These were based on a number of factors. In particular, the war generated problems which were amenable to union action, and shifted the language of industrial motivation in directions which furthered union interests. At the same time, the institutional development of trade unionism was directed along lines which discouraged it from taking a vigorous, mobilising,

role. This meant that, after 1920 (when circumstances moved against the union interest) the trade union movement was unable to resist effectively. It also meant that, as the motivation of union members became more difficult, unions tended to attempt to achieve action through notions of institutional loyalty (to the union) or, in the last resort, through disciplinary action. Union organisational structures became more centralised (at every level).

We now turn from the 'industrial wing' of labour to its 'political wing'.



Part FourLabour Politics

'a class which has to work fixed hours every day cannot have permanent and specialised assault organisations - as can a class which has ample financial resources and all of whose members are not tied down by fixed work.'

Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 232.

'Co-ordination is one of the greatest needs of the Working Class Movement, and if Labour is to function efficiently, it is imperative that all Trade Union and Labour bodies should be affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council, and thus increase the strength and influence of the central responsible body.'

Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council, Annual Report 1923,4.

'... the time has arrived, if not already past, for a general stocktaking in the Socialist movement. Our weapons and armour have become obsolete. ... The high hopes of 1919 are already shattered, and pessimism is gaining ground. The tactics of Socialism must be altered to meet an entirely new situation.'

John Gibson,  
The Labour Standard, 23 January 1926.

## Chapter 8

### Labour Politics and the Impact of War

#### 8.1 Introductory

Our next three chapters explain the development of labour's political organisation in Edinburgh. In chapter 4 we suggested that there were certain structural reasons for believing that, after the Great War, the working class may have been more receptive to proposals involving it in taking united political action than it had been in (say) the late Victorian period. Chapters 6 and 7 examined the development of trade union action: we saw, on the one hand, that work experiences continued to be diverse (strengthening our view that the notion of an 'occupational community' is inapplicable to Edinburgh); while, on the other, we saw that the depression after 1920 discouraged militant forms of industrial action. This chapter examines the impact of war on labour politics (although this involves some discussion of pre-war patterns); it is preceded by some remarks on the nature of political action and the role of political institutions. Chapter 9 concentrates on the post-war reorganisation of labour politics; while in chapter 10 we turn our attention to the years after 1920, and the struggle to control the restructured labour movement, a struggle essentially (if not simply) between 'left' and 'right'. These will lead us to conclusions about the character of the political action of Edinburgh's working class in the 'twenties.

Within the terms of the theory we developed in chapter 2, trade union action is a form, a sub-set, of political action: yet it is



valuable to point to three divergences between the mobilisation of union members by union organisations, and the mobilisation of the working class by political parties and similar bodies. Firstly, there are divergences in the social groups to be mobilised: the trade union's 'target' group is relatively narrow, as the workers in a particular factory, or industry; the political party tends to be concerned to mobilise entire classes, nations, races. Second, there are divergences in the nature of the principles used to motivate action in each context: whilst the union tends to use those which are more or less directly relevant to the workplace, the political party characteristically deploys more general principles. Thus a union might argue for an increase in its members' pay on grounds of comparability ('in all districts where brass moulders and iron moulders are working the principle is generally admitted - that the rates should be paid practically the same'),<sup>1</sup> and mobilise its members to strike on such a basis;<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, whilst a political party might support (or oppose) such a dispute, it would tend to do so on other, more general grounds - brass moulders would be too small a constituency.

Finally, there are divergences in context. The context of trade union action is generally the workplace, or at least industrial: the institutions which are actively involved in the processes of resource mobilisation and deployment are unions, workgroups, management. Other, external, institutions and legitimising principles are of course involved, but generally passively - as when wartime unions drew on popular notions of 'profiteering'. Political activity is normally seen as occurring in a national or local context: it is not delimited by any particular institutional context, although its characteristic institutions are parties, local councils, parliament -

1. ESAE&I and AEU and SBU, Conference Proceedings, 'Brass moulders rates - levelling up to iron moulders', 4 April 1921, 3.

2. Ibid., 2.

and strenuous efforts may be made to define 'politics' in terms of some specific relationship to such institutions, in order to render other forms of political activity illegitimate. This divergence is important, for our entire period can be seen as one of conflict between advocates of divergent concepts of political action for dominance of labour politics.

The concept of the 'party' is central to our study: it has been commonly assumed, by students of Labour politics, to be relatively unproblematical, an unambiguous term in a common language of political discourse whose meaning has, moreover, remained essentially constant throughout Labour's history.<sup>3</sup> If there have been important debates which relate to the meaning of 'party', these have essentially been between Labour and (say) Conservatives or Communists, not within the Labour Party itself. Thus Robert McKenzie contrasts the self-images of Conservative and Labour parties, but does not suggest the latter changed over time, certainly after 1918.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Ross McKibbin's invaluable study of the Labour Party's organisation in the years after 1918 shows how important Trades Councils continued to be; yet the possibility that this reflected, even in part, a different conception of the party's role (rather than simple administrative convenience on the path to a 'true' party structure) is not examined.<sup>5</sup> But during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were varying conceptions of the institutions which would be the vehicle of a socialist transformation, just as there were varying images of socialism - indeed, of all aspects of socialist politics - within the labour movement.

3. ILP (Central branch) minutes (January - May 1918). The main exception to this rule is Winter, Socialism and the Challenge of War, esp. 52-9, 215-23, 259-63: Winter's discussion, however, concentrates on the view of a few leading socialists. M. Rustin, 'Different conceptions of party: Labour's constitutional debates', NLR 126, 1981, 17-42, touches on some of the issues in a discussion of recent debates within the Labour Party.
4. R.T. McKenzie, British Political Parties, esp. 9-15.
5. R. McKibbin, The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924 (Oxford 1974), esp. 137-44.



We turn, shortly, to a discussion of the development of notions of the socialist 'party' in Edinburgh's labour movement. First, however, we should briefly consider the relevance of the 'party' to the theory we have developed. As the distinction between 'political' and 'trade union' activity is far more ambiguous than commonly assumed, so there are many similarities between the activities of trade unions and of socialist political parties. Those intent on motivating a group of people to some end must decide, consciously or by default, how far, and in what manner, they will make use of mediating institutions in the process. Thus trade unions, political parties, elements of these - in short, any mobilising institution - may attempt to mobilise people directly - that is, by attempting themselves to generate the legitimising principles required, and by attempting themselves to be the institutions through which contact with the people is made. But they may also attempt to do so indirectly - by using principles generated by others, by mobilising other institutions in order to achieve a mobilisation in their 'target group', or by creating other such institutions. Thus a trade union may attempt direct contact with its members, through shop stewards, branches and the like; or it may choose instead (more likely, as well) to mobilise through building links with workgroups, management, and so on. Similarly a political party may attempt direct contacts with the people, through propaganda, perhaps; or it may attempt to mobilise or influence them indirectly, by winning publicity in the press, or by activity on local authorities, or through trade unions.

Although this is a difficult distinction, it is an important one, and for two main reasons. First, indirect mobilisation involves, in effect, constructing alliances with mediating institutions: these will rarely be on precisely the basis which motivates the initiating institution, and thus the meaning of the action will be (as it were) negotiated. Since almost all political action involves indirect mobilisation, institutions are (consciously or otherwise) engaged in continual processes of negotiation - with other political bodies, with

trade unions, with social groupings of all kinds - so that the meaning of political actions is constantly under review. The coalescence and disintegration of alliances is a central aspect of our discussion.

Second, attempts to enlist support from other institutions may involve costs for the initiating institution. For each attempt is an engagement between the values and social patterns of the two institutions, and may mean that either or both will change in character in the process. This may cause tensions within, say, a party, between those who value pure adherence to principle, and those who appreciate the potential gains of alliances with important other groups or institutions: tensions which might render it ineffectual, or even lead to its disintegration as a single body.

## 8.2 Labour and socialist politics before 1914.

When socialist organisation began to emerge in Edinburgh in the 1880s<sup>6</sup> there was already 'a relatively autonomous working-class industrial and political movement, conditioned by the position and outlook of the labour aristocracy, and effectively contained within the forms of social hegemony characteristic of the period':<sup>7</sup> in effect, this meant containment within a Liberal coalition,<sup>8</sup> and an orientation toward achieving representation on those bodies where political power apparently resided. By the later 'eighties the socialists had formed some measure of support, at least on certain issues,<sup>9</sup> although their support was unstable.

6. On this, see Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 177; E.P. Thompson, William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary (London 1977), 350-1, 414.

7. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 163.

8. This period is discussed in *ibid.*, esp. 144-64; see also I. Macdougall (ed.) The Minutes of Edinburgh Trades Council 1859-1873 (Edinburgh 1968), xxx, 303 (minutes of 30 Sept. 1870).

9. *Ibid.*, 437.



Socialism in the 1880s was marked by great faith in the powers of propaganda, of direct, almost missionary, methods to win men and women to the 'cause';<sup>10</sup> other questions of strategy were secondary. With the surge of unionisation from the late 1880s, other strategies became possible. By 1892 a branch of the Independent Labour Party had been formed, and in that year fielded a parliamentary candidate in the Central division.<sup>11</sup> This points to a vital characteristic of the socialist movement in the 1890s: one which remained important at least until the end of the war. The responses, at an organisational level, to these strategic issues were not, very often, to alter the nature of an existing body, but rather to create another with a somewhat distinct purpose. Thus there was a considerable overlap in membership of all socialist organisations during this period. The socialists' electoral impact during the early 'nineties, together with their offering a programme relevant to industrial issues, led to a 'definite shift' by the Trades Council 'towards co-operation with the socialists, on an "independent labour" basis.'<sup>12</sup> Again, a new organisation was created to further this end: The Workers Municipal Committee (from 1899) provided for the affiliation of union branches, co-operative societies and political bodies, paralleling - indeed, anticipating - the formation of the national Labour Representation Committee. Within a year a 'substantial number of trade union branches, as well as the ILP and the SDF', had affiliated; and at the election of 1900 the election of the first 'Labour' councillor was secured.<sup>13</sup>

10. A term preferred by Edinburgh members of the Socialist League to 'religion' in referring to Socialism in the 1885 Socialist League manifesto: see S.Yeo, 'A New Life: the religion of socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', History Workshop Journal 4, 1977, 49. The Manifesto is to be found in Thompson, Morris 732-40.
11. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 177. The ILP branch was, strictly, a branch of the Scottish Labour Party: in the election, it polled 434 votes (against the Liberal's 3733 and Liberal-Unionist's 1758).
12. Gray, Labour Aristocracy, 181.
13. Ibid., 182. We should perhaps note that such developments were occurring throughout the country at this time: cp, e.g., D.Cox, 'The Rise of the Labour Party in Leicester,' (University of Leicester M.A., 1959), esp. 19-25; W.H.Marwick, A Short History of Labour in Scotland (Edinburgh 1967), esp. 71-2; Cole, Working Class Politics, 153-74.

There were, then, two parallel and related developments. Firstly, until perhaps the mid-'nineties, the socialist movement was marked by a zeal and common purpose which saw strategy in terms of William Morris's injunction to 'make socialists'.<sup>14</sup> But, secondly, the creation of institutions for different purposes tended to emphasise the range of objectives and methods within the movement, and to differentiate them one from another; so, by the later 'nineties, ideological differences were more important. Thus, for example, the SDF was riven during 1901-1903 by a dispute over how far socialist principles should be compromised in the pursuit of political power.<sup>15</sup>

In as much as politics can be reduced to political institutions, the politics of labour in Edinburgh after 1900 can be sketched thus. For electoral activity, there was the Workers Municipal Committee: or, from 1905, a branch of the Scottish Workers' Representation Committee, which in April 1907 changed its name to 'The Labour Party, Scottish Section, Edinburgh Branch.'<sup>16</sup> The unions' organisational and political break with Liberalism was not yet reflected in co-operation with socialists on an explicitly socialist basis. Even the Labour Party's object after 1907 was just 'The Independent Representation of Labour on all Governing and Administrative Bodies.'<sup>17</sup> To the Labour Party the Trades Council was affiliated, and through the Labour Party it pursued its electoral ambitions: many of its other

14. It may be significant that, on one estimate, the membership of the SDF rose from 483 in 1891 to a peak of 3250 in 1897, but had fallen to 1715 by 1902: see P.A.Watmough, 'The membership of the Social Democratic Federation, 1885-1902', BSSLH 34, 1977, 35-40.
15. This was particularly vehement in Scotland, where in March 1901 the SDF withdrew from the Scottish Workers' Representation Committee; and in Edinburgh and Leith where the majority of the SDF members led the breakaway to form the Socialist Labour Party. On these disputes see Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 8-22; R.Challinor, The Origins of British Bolshevism (London 1977), 9-26.
16. Edin. LP AR 1920, in TC AR 1920, 21.
17. Official letterhead: see, e.g., letter from R.T.Parker to A.Henderson, 25 July 1914, in Labour Party Library LP/PA/14/1/155.



activities were, however, political in other senses and were pursued independently - as its support for a 'Right to Work Committee' ('We believe the claim ... to be one of simple justice');<sup>18</sup> or its attempts to improve technical education facilities in the city.<sup>19</sup> Trade union branches could pursue 'non-industrial' issues by affiliation to the Trades Council (as 51 branches did in 1908);<sup>20</sup> a few also affiliated to the Labour Party, but most were involved in this electoral activity only at one remove, through the Trades Council.

These trade union bodies were joined, in the local branch of the Labour Party, by the ILP. Although explicitly a socialist organisation, the ILP's strength 'was not the possession of a coherent political philosophy, but the religious fervour with which it attacked the immediate tasks it saw before it.'<sup>21</sup> Central control was weak, and it was an organisational home for many who wished to associate themselves with socialism, but with no particular version of it. The ILP became, in the pre-war years, the Labour Party's public face. ILP members carried out the propaganda and fought the elections; trade unionists who actively supported Labour joined it. Its importance was well-recognised. Let us look, for instance, at the only Parliamentary division fought by Labour before the war (Leith, which was contested in January 1910 and at a by-election in February 1914).<sup>22</sup> An experienced Labour campaigner, who had already fought North Belfast twice, wrote to Ramsay MacDonald on receiving a 'unanimous invitation to ... address a meeting with the view of selection as Candidate.' MacDonald, then Secretary of the national Labour Party, had previously voiced 'a very favourable opinion' of the constituency; now, asked his 'present view of a candidate's

18. TC AR 1908. The Committee was led by Robert Allen, subsequently General Secretary of the STUC.

19. H.Mackinven, Edinburgh and District Trades Council Centenary 1859-1959, in TC AR 1959, 53.

20. TC AR 1908.

21. A.Marwick, 'The Independent Labour Party (1918-32)' (B.Litt.thesis, (University of Oxford 1960), 16-17.

22. Cole, Working Class Politics, 293, 300.

chances there',<sup>23</sup> he thought it 'a good constituency', but would not commit himself to 'very strong advice', just because of his assessment of the local ILP:

I was never altogether satisfied with the character of the men, taken as a whole, who composed the ILP there. If I have any hesitation about it, it is owing to this latter fact. <sup>24</sup>

In short, other affiliates to a Labour Party could not compensate for weaknesses in the ILP.

On this basis, the Labour Party had made substantial advances by 1914: a councillor was returned in 1909, joined by two others in 1911, and three more in 1913.<sup>25</sup> Three Labour members were returned to the School Board in 1911; a Labour Parish Councillor was elected in 1908. But for the ILP propaganda was not inevitably associated only with elections; and the SDF was, perhaps primarily, concerned with propaganda and education. Where the SDF rejected (after 1901, and until 1914)<sup>26</sup> virtually any institutional mediation of its message, the ILP accepted the constraints (and the opportunities) implicit in participation in elections, whilst maintaining a substantial amount of direct propaganda. Apart from the ILP, the most vital socialist party in Edinburgh during the early years of the century was the Socialist Labour Party. This broke with the SDF in 1903, led by a number of the Scottish branches and heavily influenced by the American Marxist, Daniel De Leon: Edinburgh and Leith were at the head of this movement, and indeed the Party's national headquarters, and its publishing house, were in Edinburgh until the war.

In Edinburgh, the SLP was the main representative of Marxist socialism. Whereas the ILP was an essentially open organisation, with little dogma (but, by the same token, little theory), and tolerant of a wide range of views within its membership, the SLP was based on a

23. William Walker: letter to J.R.MacDonald, 20 February 1909: LP/CAN /06/2/244.

24. J.R.MacDonald, letter to W.Walker, 22 February 1909: LP/CAN/06/2/245.

25. R.A.Fox, 'Members of the Labour Party elected to Edinburgh Town Council' (1971: typescript in possession of Edin. Trades Council), 1-2.

26. Kendall, 171. Strictly, the SDF became the Social Democratic Party in 1909 and the British Socialist Party in 1911.



highly specific theory of social change. Even more than the SDF (which, taking the country as a whole, was the major Marxist party), the SLP would have no truck with parliament and trade union leaders;<sup>27</sup> indeed, the 'way to socialism [was] blocked by "pure and simple" trade unions' as a whole. The answer lay in the construction of socialist trade unions. With such a strict position the Party came to assume

the characteristics of a narrow dogmatic sect, convinced that it alone held the key to salvation, believing that all beyond its boundaries were finally damned, certain that salvation could not be achieved without a constant search for heresy and its prompt elimination wherever it appeared. 28

Thus Neil Maclean, the Party's most prominent member, was expelled when he joined the Edinburgh 'Right to Work' Committee, and took part in its delegation to the Town Council in 1908.<sup>29</sup>

From about 1908 the SLP began to suffer a number of problems. Firstly, its theoretical clarity was eroded, as De Leon gave his support to the Industrial Workers of the World's amalgam of socialism, syndicalism, and industrial unionism: the way ahead now called for industrial, rather than socialist, unions.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, the labour unrest provided contemporary examples of trade unionism which, if not socialist, were neither pure nor simple.<sup>31</sup> Thus internal debates on strategy developed, which led to disputes about Party organisation. 'Members were no longer forbidden to address outside bodies or to hold trade union office.'<sup>32</sup> This led to criticism in Edinburgh, where the branch claimed that the Party had allowed itself to be dominated by an official gang. A large number of members

27. In its attitude to theory, the SLP can be seen as even more dogmatic than the SDF; it was also a rather different theory. On the SDF, see H. Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation' in Briggs and Saville (eds.), Essays in Labour History 1886 - 1923, 47-69; and Kendall, passim.

28. Kendall, 68.

29. Challinor, Origins, 109.

30. Kendall, 66-7.

31. Challinor, Origins, 56-106; Holton, British Syndicalism.

32. Challinor, Origins, 118.

had only a dim conception of what the Party stood for. Suffice it to say that fully three-fourths of the Party consisted of members who were connected with shop stewardism. 33

In 1911 the Edinburgh branch was expelled from the SLP. (Its members in June 1912 established the British Section of the International Socialist Labour Party,<sup>34</sup> an organisation whose subsequent record lends credence to the view that the nominal grandeur of socialist organisations is inversely related to their political significance.)

Nonetheless, the mainstream of the SLP gained in influence as its members began to involve themselves in the trade union movement. Its influence was particularly strong in the NUR at the height of the union's flirtation with syndicalism and industrial unionism; and in the infant Labour College movement. Thus John S. Clarke, one of the SLP's most accomplished propagandists, gave a series of lectures to the Edinburgh No. 1 branch of the NUR, under Central Labour College auspices, from 1912 or 1913;<sup>35</sup> and, from the branch's post-war attitudes, there is every reason to believe he made some impact - no doubt on fertile ground. Yet the major activities of the SLP during the pre-war period were public propaganda: its methods were similar to those of ILP, SDF, and others. Meetings were held, on street corners, in large part, but in Edinburgh predominantly in two places:

33. R. McCaig, Report on the Decline and Fall of the SLP (Airdrie, n.d.), 5, quoted in Challinor, Origins, 119.
34. Challinor, Origins, 119.
35. J.P.M. Millar, The Labour College Movement (London n.d. [1979]) 20, records these as 'a series of winter course lectures ... to a class run by the Edinburgh No. 1 branch of the ASRS' in 1912; according to J. Atkins, Neither Crumbs nor Condescension. The Central Labour College 1909 - 1915 (Aberdeen 1981), 70, CLC extension classes were held for the Edin. NUR in 1913/14 and 1914/15 (when the book's period ends); R. Challinor, John S. Clarke. Parliamentarian, Poet, Lion-Tamer (London 1977) 25, gives no precise date, but records that the class he was asked to teach was on 'A marxist interpretation of prehistoric archaeology', that 35 railwaymen attended, and that it was still running after two years (though it had moved on to other historical periods, and opened to others besides railwaymen).



on the Mound, just off Princes Street, close to railway station, 'bus terminus, and the centres of working-class residence in the Old Town; and in the East Meadows. Here John S. Clarke (and other good speakers) could gather 'as many as 2,000 people at a time';<sup>36</sup> Hyman Levy, who grew up in the city, described its impact on him thus:

On Sunday nights the Mound ... became a hotbed of political discussion and social analysis. Here a vast crowd, sober, washed and clean-collared, foregathered to listen to speakers, of all political complexions. ... How was one to disentangle the respective differences, if any, of the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labour Party, or the Social Democratic Federation? Time and again with a copper I could ill afford, I bought a penny pamphlet with a picture on the outer cover of a heavily-bearded gentleman called Karl Marx. 37

So when war came, labour politics in Edinburgh was not set upon an unchangeable course. Trade union politics was closely allied with the ILP for electoral purposes, and was beginning to mark up some successes; but the allegiance was not on a socialist basis. The Labour Party was little more than the name of this electoral coalition. The main activity of the ILP and of other socialist parties was propaganda; a relatively unmediated presentation of socialist theories and analyses to the public. The major exceptions to this were, firstly, the ILP's involvement in electoral politics, and, second, the SLP's attention (from about 1909) to trade unions. Thus the ILP recognised the importance of working through the Labour Party, and with trade unions, if socialists were to achieve practical power; the SLP began to develop an analysis which allowed it to apply its Marxism to problems of trade union strategy and organisation.

36. Ibid., 33.

37. H. Levy, Social Thinking (London 1945), 8. The pamphlets were no doubt published by the SLP: cp Challinor, Origins, 40-41. The BSP and the SDF would not have been debating with one another, being the same organisation at different times.

Involvement with bodies of different political outlook could have caused problems for both organisations. The ILP escaped serious harm by virtue of its ideological flexibility: little was demanded of members save a general belief in socialism; hard labour in the cause was welcomed, but enforced only by moral sanctions. In the SLP theory was all; changes in strategy led to dispute. The organisational solution was in a discipline which showed no favour even to its most noted members.

### 8.3 War: new issues and institutions

We may distinguish four levels on which the war altered the character of labour and socialist politics. Firstly, the range of issues confronting the movement, and around which it might need to mobilise, shifted. Second, there was a widening of the movement's institutional horizon, as labour representation was admitted in an increasing number of areas. Thirdly, there was the development of the institutional resources available within the labour movement, as the trade union movement, in particular, expanded. Finally, there was the tendency for legitimising principles to be more open to interpretation in the interest of the working class. We now examine these four levels in more detail; much of the material has already been dealt with, especially in chapter 5: we shall not, repeat this, but seek only to show its relevance to labour politics, and to supplement it where necessary.

The war, we have argued, generated a host of problems which were (to a greater or lesser extent) amenable to solution through union mobilisation on a sectional or workplace basis: it also generated a number of other problems which workplace mobilisation was less likely to solve. It is instructive to list the main issues, as mentioned in wartime Trades Council and Labour Party annual reports: prices and the cost of living, conscription and recruitment, housing, food control, pensions, the plight of disabled ex-servicemen. We have seen that prices and the cost of living were issues which work-



place mobilisation could tackle, through winning pay rises in various forms (or working longer hours); it seems too that some of the questions of military recruitment were effectively dealt with at this level. The remaining issues, however, demanded other forms of action, which were developed as appropriate to the various problems. This is not, however, to claim that they were adequate to tackle the problems effectively: broadly, they were not. But as the problems were perceived within the labour movement as issues on which it was legitimate to take action, so mobilisation of various kinds was attempted.

We turn, secondly, to the widening of labour's institutional horizon. Fundamental to this was the importance of the working class to the war effort; the consequence was that the Government needed channels through which to maintain the commitment of the working class, and one such channel (perhaps the most important) lay through the established organisations and leaders of labour. This has been widely acknowledged: but the common interpretation has been to stress the success of this as a Government strategy. Thus although, for Miliband, 'many Labour leaders' had begun, in the pre-war decades, to learn a 'dual role' (representatives of workers: but also Governments' representatives in relation to the working class), yet

it was the war which gave that role new institutional forms. In the course of those four years of brokerage, a host of Labour representatives became deeply involved in the business of the State and, with their service in the new bureaucracy that was born of the war, acquired a stake, if not in the country, at least in the country's official business. 38

Yet whilst involvement in these institutions carried such risks, there were also possibilities; it was an awareness of these which underlay a discussion of 'The War and the Future' in the 1916 Annual Report of

38. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, 47; cp Middlemas, esp. 71-81, 88-90, 98-119, for a fuller elaboration of an essentially similar thesis.

the Trades Council:

Since hostilities began, the Trade Unions and the Labour Party have been specially consulted, and their advice sought on matters directly affecting their interest. The Prime Minister and Secretaries of State have met with them in secret, and private information has been given them. Special Congresses have been called to be addressed by the Government and their military chiefs. Recruiting schemes have been hatched with their aid. Labour, too, now sits in the Cabinet. On the many Committees set up to deal with the industrial and other problems arising out of the war, Labour has been provided with statutory representation. 39

In short, there was a plausible view that <sup>governmental, and quasi-</sup>access to/governmental, institutions, from which it had previously been excluded, gave labour a greater ability to defend its interests. And it was not only the national leaders of labour who became involved in such bodies: the institutions open to labour representation also multiplied locally. There were some, of course, even before the war; by early 1916 the Trades Council had assisted with the Derby Scheme, and was represented on exemption tribunals under the Military Service Acts;<sup>40</sup> as the war continued, it is clear that not only was there increasing labour representation on war-related committees (such as War Pensions and Food Control),<sup>41</sup> there was also a new tendency for labour representation to be invited onto other bodies (such as the Royal Infirmary's Board of Management).<sup>42</sup>

There were some good reasons for imagining that these processes were concessions, to be exploited to the full while the opportunity lasted; rather than cunning strategies perpetrated by those bent on subduing the working class anew. Certainly a decision was taken by

39. TC AR 1916, 6-9.

40. Ibid., 5. Before the war, the main labour non-elective representation was in Education Advisory Committees, and Pension Committees administering the Old Age Pension Acts.

41. TC AR 1918, 12-15.

42. TC AR 1917, 8.



the Trades Council:

The Council had either to face this responsibility and the expense it entailed and take that part in public administration which opportunity gave, or recede to a position of critical aloofness. It wisely chose the first alternative ... practically unanimously .... 43

We should remember, too, that this form of involvement of labour representatives followed immediately the rapid expansion of Labour representation on Town and Parish councils during 1910-1913; and coincided with the period when the new councillors were beginning to participate in Council committees. Perhaps, with just six councillors, winning representation on the various council committees was itself an achievement. Thus in 1911-1912 the Edinburgh Labour Party Annual Report contains a Town Council report which is perfunctory and general, and a plea from the first Labour councillor that there was

a good deal to be learned about City affairs, and the effectiveness of a representative is not greatest until he has mastered a lot. 44

Just six years later the Labour councillors were reporting in detail on a wide range of social issues: housing, transport, pensions, child welfare, education, food control, and so forth.<sup>45</sup> This must have been a learning process, and we need not be surprised if the terms of the representation, and their implications, were not always clearly appreciated. For leaving aside those areas where it was achieved through election, labour representation was granted on restrictive terms. On the Local Food Committee there were only six labour members out of fifteen (and this after 'agitation', and including representatives of the Co-operative movement);<sup>46</sup> when the Royal Infirmary Board agreed to workers' representation, it did so by adding

43. Ibid., 4.

44. Labour Party, Edin. branch, AR 1911-12.

45. Labour Party, Edin. branch, AR 1917-18, 4-7.

46. TC AR 1918, 12.

five such representatives to its existing twenty-one.<sup>47</sup> When the Town Council appointed a Tribunal under the Military Service Act, it elected two Trades Council nominees (in a Tribunal of 25); it also elected two Labour councillors 'to sit as Labour representatives' in an apparent attempt to impose not only the quantity, but also the character, of Labour representation:

The Trades Council, while having every confidence in the judgement of these two councillors, objected to their being regarded as Labour representatives in the sense of the provisions of the regulations. The Trades Council held, as they were appointed by the Town Council to complete the number of Town Councillors who were entitled to sit on the Tribunal, to call them Labour representatives was to give them a dual qualification, and to allow more representatives of other interests to take office. 48

It seems that the point was conceded; but the attempt is clear. So whilst the involvement of labour representatives in the machinery of government increased substantially, and thus increased the institutional compass of labour politics, the representation was limited both in number and in the terms of its involvement.

#### 8.4 War: the political institutions of labour

We turn now, and thirdly, to the development of the institutional resources available within the labour movement. Much of this has been covered in chapter 7: the growth of trade union membership and organisation in particular. The former brought organisational problems which were not overcome. Mobilisation was largely decentralised; successes were achieved on a sectional basis, initiated locally and supported less by the strength of labour's institutional structure than by economic and ideological circumstance. But the

47. TCAR 1917, 8-11.

48. TC AR 1916, 5.



essence of political achievement for labour lay in the co-ordination of action: we must therefore examine the relationships between the various institutions of the movement.

As we have seen, even before the war the role of the Labour Party in Edinburgh's labour politics was a restricted one: the evidence suggests that this continued during wartime (and probably its role became even more limited); that the role of the Trades Council was enhanced; and that the Trades Council became somewhat distanced from the Labour Party. It was probably inevitable that the vitality of an organisation which was, in essence, a coalition for electoral purposes, would decline during a period of electoral truce:<sup>49</sup> for its rationale had evaporated. The surviving wartime minutes of the Edinburgh branch indicate that it met, on average, every two or three months during 1917 and 1918. Its discussions appear to have been desultory: the occasional protest;<sup>50</sup> sporadic attempts to form ward committees;<sup>51</sup> a letter from Arthur Henderson suggesting a General Election was imminent: perhaps an attempt to invigorate the organisation.<sup>52</sup> Labour representatives on public bodies do not seem to have reported to the meetings; indeed, seem not even to have attended.<sup>53</sup> So the Edinburgh Labour Party was neither

49. It was agreed that seats would not be contested during the war period, although in November 1914 'three retiring Labour members were opposed ... but were returned with large majorities' (TC AR 1915, quoted R.Fox, 2). There were no further contests until after the war.

50. E.g., on the disenfranchisement of conscientious objectors, see Labour Party, Edin.branch minutes, 13 December 1917.

51. Ibid., 22 November 1917, 14 February, 13 June 1918.

52. Ibid., 22 November 1917: he expected an election during the first six months of 1918.

53. At one branch meeting, a delegation of two members had to be appointed to meet Labour councillors anent housing policy: *ibid*, undated fragment (but probably c.11 October 1917 from internal evidence; incorrectly marked '1918', presumably by National Library of Scotland staff). Town and Parish councillors did, of course, submit written reports for the branch Annual Report, and probably attended the Annual General Meeting. School Board representatives did report more often.

electorally effective (perforce), nor did it effectively supervise its councillors. It had, in short, little to do.

This contrasts with the position of the Trades Council. As we have seen, this was involved in attempts to develop and co-ordinate union action, and in various ways in the apparatus of war-time civil administration. With certain qualifications (such as the Town Council's attempt to minimise its representation on Military Service Tribunals), it was perceived as the representative body of labour in the City by those outside the movement: and the inevitable consequence was to enhance its role within the movement. Clearly the character of the Trades Council was changed somewhat by this engagement with government. In 1917 the Annual Report recorded that

the extra work thrown on the [Trades] Council in connection with new administrative bodies formed to deal with matters arising out of the war, and the lost time of representatives that had to be paid, have added materially to the expense of the Council's work. 54

But although the Trades Council was extremely busy, and although its status was enhanced, it did not make any real attempt to strengthen or extend the political institutions of the labour movement (as opposed to those in which it participated jointly with non-labour bodies). We shall look at two aspects of this.

On the one hand, the Trades Council still found issues on which the joint administrative machinery was manifestly inadequate. This might mean dispatching a deputation to the authority which could mend the wrong: arguing 'reasonably', and within the vocabulary of motives acceptable to the authority. Or it might mean attempting to shift this vocabulary, by generating additional or alternative legitimising principles: this might imply creating institutions which could sustain such principles. It is instructive to look at the main issue on which labour was excluded from the processes of government and administration: housing. Especially in Scotland, this was the major non-industrial



issue of the war period (we have seen, in chapter 4, some of the background to this). Here the Trades Council's approach was not unsophisticated; and at various times popular discontent ran deep. Yet the Trades Council found it difficult to capitalise on this in the form of deep-rooted or lasting organisation.

In 1915 discontent over housing conditions on Clydeside had led to the famous rent strike, and to Government concession in the form of the Rent Restriction Act of 1915: the latter, though perhaps wrongly, was widely seen as an affirmation of the potential effectiveness of working class action, and led directly to the formation of the Scottish Labour Housing Association.<sup>55</sup> But there was a considerable ambiguity in its activity. The SLHA drew not only on the tradition of 'direct action' exemplified by the rent strike; as the 'urgent connection between industrial and housing issues'<sup>56</sup> waned after the strike, more mainstream traditions of protest came to the fore. Where the organisation of the rent strike on Clydeside had relied on the development of community-based mobilising institutions, the activity of the SLHA concentrated on co-ordinating the existing institutions of the labour movement in relation to the housing issue: over several years, this had some effect on the terms of the housing debate, and doubtless played some part in eliciting the post-war housing concessions from government. But this approach represented an implicit acceptance that the structure of the labour movement was adequate to

55. On the Clyde rent strike, see J. McHugh, 'The Clyde rent strike, 1915', SLHSJ 12, 1978, 56-61; J. Melling, 'The Glasgow rent strike and Clydeside labour - some problems of interpretation', SLHSJ 13, 1979, 39-44; B. Moorhouse, M. Wilson, C. Chamberlain, 'Rent strikes - direct action and the working class', Socialist Register 1972, esp. 135-6, 150-53; on the link between the rent strike and the formation of the SLHA see J. Melling, 'Clydeside housing and the evolution of state rent control, 1900 - 1939' in Melling (ed.) Housing, Social Policy, and the State, esp. 147-51. Melling incorrectly refers to the SLHA as the Scottish Labour Party Housing Association.

56. *Ibid.*, 151.

deal with housing issues: in its pattern, at least, if not in its extent. And yet there is little sign that this was so.

In Edinburgh, the Trades Council's involvement with the SLHA (it was involved in its formation, and was one of its main supporters in the capital) reflected this approach. We can see this if we look at the Council's activity on housing during just one year - 1916, for instance. Having participated in the founding conference of the SLHA in January,<sup>57</sup> the chief grievance (housing conditions for workers at Rosyth Naval Base: many, of course, were living in Edinburgh) was taken up thus. A deputation was sent 'to gain particulars concerning the type of houses provided for workers at the Naval base'; the deputation reported to a Conference of 'Trade Union Branches, Labour and Socialist Bodies, and Women's Guilds'.<sup>58</sup> This led to a protest resolution and a deputation to the Town Council:

The deputation protested strongly against the suggested renovation of closed slum property and stated that if new houses could not be provided, that large houses now standing empty, should be commandeered for the workers' use. <sup>59</sup>

The deputation met with no success: such proposals can hardly have commended themselves to a Town Council replete with property-owners.<sup>60</sup> A subsequent deputation, dispatched to the Admiralty in London, fared little better.<sup>61</sup> We have here both an approach which inevitably casts labour in a suppliant role, and, in their proposals, a trace of a more assertive attitude: the latter, however, could not be successful in the context of the former, whilst the former was almost inevitable given the unwillingness (or inability) to restructure the labour movement, and given the fundamental commitment to a 'national interest' in the war effort.

57. TC AR 1916, 10.

58. TC AR 1917, 11.

59. Ibid., 11-12.

60. Cp s.3.3 above.

61. TC AR 1917, 12.



The second aspect of the Trades Council's tendency to pay little attention to strengthening the institutional base of labour politics is shown in its wartime attitude to the Labour Party. Previously, it had maintained a relatively firm control: the Party's secretary had also been secretary of the Council;<sup>62</sup> as late as 30 July 1914 the Trades Council had endeavoured to send its own delegates to the Conference which was to appoint a Scottish Advisory Committee of the Labour Party.<sup>63</sup> During the war, the Trades Council's interest was reduced: the Labour Party served no electoral purpose; and there was no need to deal with Labour councillors through

Table 8.1 Delegates of Edinburgh Trades Council to the Labour Party, Edinburgh branch, 1916-20

		<u>Attendance at TC</u> <u>(preceding year)</u>		<u>TC status</u>
		<u>Actual</u>	<u>Possible</u>	
<u>1916-17</u>				
H. Earl	Nat. League of Blind	24	26	-
John Williamson	Typefounders	22	26	-
J. Murphy	Corporation Employees	24	26	E1916
R. Simpson	Shale Miners	8	8	E1916&1917
<u>1917-18</u>				
Jas. Kelly	NU Railwaymen No 1	15	27	-
J. Rutherford	Shop Assistants (hairdressers)	13	27	-
J. Coates	Coachmakers	9	13	-
J. Hogg	Rail Clerks	18	27	- *
<u>1918-19</u>				
Jas. Kelly	NU Railwaymen No 1	23	26	E1918
J. Rutherford	Shop Assistants (hairdressers)	21	26	-
J. Hogg	Rail Clerks	19	26	- *
J. Elliott	NU Railwaymen No 3	12	26	-
<u>1919-20</u>				
Miss Moffat	Postal & Telegraphic Clerks	4	4	-
A. Bain	Furnishing Trades	17	19	-
J. Rutherford	Shop Assistants (hairdressers)	22	25	-
J. F. Wallace	Engineers (West branch)	22	25	E1919; P1920

E: on executive committee in year beginning March.

P: president in year beginning March.

\*: whilst not on the executive committee, Hogg was the T.C.'s auditor during the years 1917-18, 1918-19 and 1919-20.

Source: TC ARs, 1916-1919.

62. Fred Hamilton: cp TC AR 1908.

63. Letter, Alexander Smith to Arthur Henderson, 30 July 1914 (LP/SAC/14/13): representation was refused, despite Smith's assertion that Glasgow constituted a precedent: see letter, J.S. Middleton to A. Smith, 1 August 1914 (LP/SAC/14/14).

an intermediary. The delegates to the local Labour Party appointed by the Trades Council between 1916 and 1920 (four were elected in each year) are shewn in table 8.1: they were trusted and probably conscientious delegates, well-known to the Trades Council in most (but not all) cases, but not active at its highest levels. (The Council's Executive Committee was fifteen strong during these years.) This is not the policy of an organisation interested in detailed intervention in the Party. Even the records of those who were EC members tell the same story: two were EC members for just one year each; a third who was a member for two years apparently elected against being a delegate to the Party in the second. Only one, Wallace, was a man of obvious substance in the Council, becoming President in 1920. Yet by 1919 the amalgamation of the two organisations was on the immediate agenda; it is surprising that, even then, the Council was content to have only one EC member as a delegate.

Nor was this collective disinterest counteracted by any deep involvement by the individual delegates. No Trades Council delegate served on the Labour Party branch executive for 1917-18.<sup>64</sup> In 1918 the Council agreed that the attendance of its delegates 'could not be considered satisfactory',<sup>65</sup> though it made no move to remedy the position: indeed, three of the delegates whose performance was thus criticised were returned again the following year. Neither was there any substantial overlap between leading Trades Council and Labour Party members. No-one who was a member of the Labour Party's executive committee in 1917-1918 was also a member of the Trades Council's EC in that or the previous year: there was one common member with the Council's executive of 1918-1919 (but this was the Labour Party's chairman in the period immediately before amalgamation).<sup>66</sup>

64. Labour Party, Edin. branch Annual Report 1917/18.

65. TC minutes, 7 May 1918.

66. Cp Labour Party, Edin. branch minutes, 3 December 1917.



The Trades Council, then, whilst busy, did not intervene actively to change the institutional structure of labour politics markedly during the war: it responded to stimuli which originated outside the movement, and it intervened actively (if without great success) to restructure the local trade union movement; but in politics it was largely passive. Yet its involvement in so much quasi-governmental politics inevitably shifted the orientation of labour politics. We might reasonably suppose that the alteration in the relative roles of Labour Party and Trades Council also affected socialist politics in the city: unfortunately, the surviving evidence is insufficient to allow precise statements about this. We can, however, sketch socialist politics at the end of the war.

Probably the ILP suffered a loss of momentum with the suspension of elections; its value to the trade unions - as an electoral ally - was reduced. At the same time, it was riven by the dispute about commitment to the war. Yet what is most striking about the ILP is the extent to which it absorbed these problems: its fervour was related to a general, not a tightly-defined, end; and to no particular method. There is no record of a discussion about the war in the surviving wartime minutes of Edinburgh Central branch,<sup>67</sup> and the common attitude seems to have been to avoid formal debate on the subject of the war, but to concentrate on areas where agreement within the Party could be found: issues such as 'Land Socialisation' and opposition to wartime encroachments on civil liberties.<sup>68</sup> Thus it escaped the organisational splits which affected the BSP over the war question; and although we cannot be certain that the ILP had grown during the war, it seems to have been growing at least in 1917 and 1918, and it was almost certainly the largest socialist organisation in the City. In 1917 its three branches had a combined membership probably exceeding 300, and the (key) Central branch alone was able to pay its affiliation fee to the Labour Party in February 1919 'on

67. ILP(C) minutes survive from 11 January 1918 to the Armistice.

68. ILP (C) minutes, 21 June, 27 September 1918; letter Ernest A. Bartlett to Secretary, ILP(C), 20 September 1918.

200 members'.<sup>69</sup> The meetings of the Central branch were held fortnightly, and the average attendance seems to have been about thirty: in May 1918 forty members attended a meeting, and this was considered 'good' by the minutes;<sup>70</sup> a few weeks previously about eighty had been 'a good turnout of members' for the branch's annual general meeting.<sup>71</sup>

Although the ILP's role in electoral politics was of little importance while the latter were suspended, by the later years of the war the ILP had close informal connections with the trade unions. Of the twelve officials and executive committee members of the Central branch in 1917/18, for instance, certainly, four probably five, and quite possibly more were active trades unionists; so too were many others of the branch's leading members.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, however, there is no sign of any attempt to intervene politically in union affairs, or to mobilise unions in pursuit of some Party objective. The priorities of the ILP are well-defined by the committees which the Central branch appointed: two on 'propaganda' (one for the summer's outdoor work, one for the winter); one each on 'Halls ', 'Social', 'Labour Party (Edinburgh branch)' (presumably the ILP's delegates), and 'Parliamentary campaign'.<sup>73</sup> In short, 'politics' for the ILP continued to mean, primarily, propaganda in which there was direct contact between the Party and the people; trade unionists who were also socialists might join the ILP, and their socialism would be reflected in their union work. But it was an individual rather than a collective intervention in union affairs.

Of the other socialist bodies we can be still less certain. The schism in the BSP led to the formation, by the pro-war group in

69. Edin. branch, LP Annual Report 1917-18, 8; ILP(C) minutes 28 February 1919.

70. Ibid., 3 May 1918.

71. Ibid., 29 March 1918.

72. Edin. Central branch ILP, 'List of Officials and Standing Committees for the year to 28 February 1918'.

73. Ibid., the list also includes individuals responsible for 'Dues', 'Literature', 'District Federation ILP', 'Workers Educational Association'. I have listed the committees in the order (of importance?) in which they were set down in the original.



Edinburgh, of an organisation called the Scottish Socialist Federation. Though small, this contained several who were influential in the city's labour movement.<sup>74</sup> We know that branches of the BSP, SLP and BSISLP continued to function.<sup>75</sup> We may assume that all continued their propagandistic work; and it seems that the last-mentioned was largely restricted to this. Certainly its theoretical position excluded most other activities, and its contact with the remainder of the labour movement may have been restricted to the occasional debate.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to its national policy, the BSP branch in Edinburgh was not affiliated to the Labour Party: which may signify either its dissent from the policy, or its insignificant size.<sup>77</sup> Otherwise, we can only surmise that the general development of these organisations followed the pattern found elsewhere. This suggests that wartime militancy, and particularly the unofficial shop stewards movement, provided the mechanism through which BSP and - above all - SLP militants began to turn from politics qua propaganda and education to a consciousness of the political dimension of industrial organisation and mobilisation:

The wartime shop stewards' movement carried Industrial Unionism and revolutionary syndicalism from propaganda to action, from the branch to the workshop. 78

- 74. This 'Scottish Socialist Federation' should not be confused with either that which linked SDF and Socialist League in the late 1880s or that formed by Edinburgh ILP branches which preferred to secede from the ILP rather than the Labour Party in 1931.
- 75. Cp ILP(c) minutes, 16 May 1919.
- 76. Cp letter, 20 January 1918, T.Tait, Organiser, Edin.branch, BSISLP to Secretary, ILP(C), challenging ILP to debate 'The ILP is unworthy of working class support'.
- 77. The BSP, having voted to affiliate to the Labour Party in 1914, did so in 1916, according to Kendall, 171; no BSP branch was affiliated to Edinburgh Labour Party in 1917/18.
- 78. Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement, 283. Hinton's is probably the best study of this, but cp Kendall, esp. 103-69; Challinor, Origins, esp. 150-70.

Whilst the shop stewards' movement, as we have seen, had a shallower basis in Edinburgh than in the West of Scotland, Edinburgh was a stronghold of the SLP. It would therefore be unwise to ignore these trends within Marxist socialism; in addition, there is evidence - as we shall presently see - that the influence of these ideas ran deep in certain sectors of industry.

#### 8.5 War: political motivation

We look now at the fourth level at which the war affected labour and socialist politics. We have argued, in chapter 7, that the war changed the motivational context of industrial politics. The legitimacy of 'profit' was eroded; notions of 'efficiency', 'organisation', and so on, long closely-associated with profit, became distanced from it, and - more important - open to interpretation in the working class or trade union interest; union activity, and workers' rights, were legally recognised (if not always effectively enforced); the sense of ordinary people's sacrifice in France strengthened working class self-confidence. All these elements, however, turned on the generation within the workplace of a host of problems which, in the light of these new motives, could be perceived as important and soluble; or on the generation of problems outside the workplace which could be tackled within it. Now, broadly, these or similar changes also occurred in the motivational context of politics more generally. 'Profiteering' was a social, not merely an industrial, vice; 'efficiency' and 'organisation' were not seen as entirely, or even primarily, industrial principles - but as relevant to society as a whole; sacrifice in France was in no way closely associated with industry as such. What was significant was that, in the workplace, these found an institutional context which made them relevant as principles legitimising action: in discussing the impact of these and similar sources of motive, we must consider how far labour and socialist politics offered a context which made principles legitimising a sense of injustice or grievance into principles legitimising a course of action. We must also consider that



legitimising principles can be relevant to different groups, and have different impacts in each.

In part, the wartime period can be seen as one in which the labour movement was in internal dispute over the definition of political action. There were two poles in this dispute, and each may be regarded as providing a framework which enabled general principles to become principles legitimising specific courses of action. Each pole developed during the war (though each, of course, drew on more than just wartime experience). We should add, too, that the labour movement did not split clearly between these two definitions: there was tension between them not least because many individuals subscribed to some elements of both. The first pole can be characterised as an enhanced view of the powers of the state, coupled sometimes with an optimistic view of the possibility of labour's gaining control of it, or at least influencing it. As early as 1916 an awareness was growing that

there are great latent possibilities  
in the powers now in force whereby  
the State can commandeer supplies,  
take over businesses, assume control  
of factories, and run the transport  
services. 79

As the intricacy of state control increased with the length of the war, so this awareness grew deeper roots. To be conscious of the state's power for good did not imply a belief that it could never be misused:

The powers contained under the Defence  
of the Realm Act, and under the  
Munitions Act, may be a starting-point  
for a reactionary and repressive  
policy. 80

Nor was it necessary to believe that state control always operated effectively: it was, indeed, often an article of faith that it did not, either because the state wished it so, or because of the influence

79. TC AR 1916, 9. On the impact of wartime planning on British Labour thought, cp A. Oldfield, 'The Growth of the Concept of Economic Planning in the Doctrine of the British Labour Party, 1914-1935' (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1973), esp. 99-121.

80. TC AR 1916, 9.

of entrenched vested interests. The Trades Council accused the Town Council, for instance, of attempting 'to frustrate or delay direct municipal action [on housing], and to provide a new field of operations for the discredited speculator', rather than accept the full recommendations of the Royal Commission on housing.<sup>81</sup> But the belief seems commonly to have been that the possibilities of state control, planning and organisation had been amply demonstrated: inadequacies could be blamed on failures of will. Thus in 1917 food scarcities led the Government to urge local authorities

to start Communal Kitchens, but the suspicion was raised that there was an attempt to get the workers and their families to use glorified soup kitchens so as to keep the well-to-do immune from hardship and inconvenience. 82

The response, however, does not suggest that, even after three years of war, there were serious questions about where the solution lay. A demonstration in the Meadows demanded

that profiteering be ended, that steps be taken to completely control and regulate the food supplies, and that the Government disclose their plans for rationing. 83

We have already seen how 'the status Labour has secured, and its call to the counsels of the nation,'<sup>84</sup> provided an institutional framework through which labour could hope to gain control - or at least some influence - over the apparatus of the state. The experience of state power during the war offered a ready example of its importance.

The second pole in the debate about the meaning of political action drew not so much on the power of existing government structures as on that of the existing trade union movement. This approach located political strength in the trade union movement. Such a view

81. TC AR 1918, 17; cp Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland, Cd.8731.

82. TC AR 1918, 12.

83. Ibid. For the context to this, see Marwick, Deluge, 206-208.

84. TC AR 1916, 9-10.



was, of course, not unreasonable (if perhaps over-optimistic). It rested, apart from the growth of union strength during the war, on views of the potential of trade union action which owed much to pre-war syndicalism and industrial unionism. Pre-war British syndicalism was a movement encompassing a variety of understandings about politics and trades unionism, rather than a coherent, unified, body of theory; but it was an important element in the political reasoning of a large number of labour militants. When James Larkin spoke in Edinburgh in December 1913, 7000 supporters turned out to hear him. 'The platform was stormed by sympathisers eager to shake Mr. Larkin by the hand.'<sup>85</sup> Men and women such as these would have experienced the war with dispositions which comprehended 'direct action'; which believed labour unionism (of some kind) could form the basis of a new society; which saw in the state more dangers than possibilities.<sup>86</sup> This general political outlook, stressing solution through industrial organisation and action, was strengthened by the importance of the SLP in Edinburgh, and by the success of shop stewards and other trade union movements during the war.

Such understandings underlay widespread labour fears about the trend of government policy: . . . . .

there is another view of War precedents. . . . .  
The munition trades are disarmed; the strike is an illegal weapon, and those that suggests its resumption find that penal servitude is their portion. All this may be explained on the ground of military necessity, but it seems an ominous invasion of industrial liberty. <sup>87</sup>

85. Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury, 12 December 1913, quoted by Holton, British Syndicalism, 196.

86. The most comprehensive study is Holton, British Syndicalism, but see also Holton, 'Syndicalist Theories of the State'; G. Brown (ed.) The Industrial Syndicalist (Nottingham 1974: reprint of a periodical, 1910-11, edited by Tom Mann), esp. 5-29; Brown, Sabotage, esp. 23-40.

87. TC AR 1916, 9.

Such was the view of the Trades Council itself, so heavily involved in the apparatus of government, not simply of a few extremists. Within the mainstream of the movement there was an ambivalence, very often: political and economic developments and possibilities were perceived in terms of both understandings of 'politics', simultaneously.

Safety from the dangers that lie ahead will only be found in stronger industrial and political organisation, by the workers assuming the power to control their own destinies, and not remaining content with a share as a polite and gracious concession. 88

Thus the Trades Council again. It was, therefore, by no means inevitable (if we were to abstract Edinburgh alone) that wartime developments would lead to the dominance of the post-1918 Labour Party.

One final, but important, consideration should be mentioned. Although there was a significant anti-war minority within the labour movement, the dominant attitude was an acceptance of the necessity of the war. This reflected a patriotism common to all classes. Returning to Edinburgh from Portobello, the pacifist, Clifford Allen, found on 'Top of tram [a] state of slight drunkenness and great hilarity and much hatred of Germans';<sup>89</sup> this was the time, too, when vigorous opposition to the establishment of a professorship of German in the University could deny the validity of the German language and literature.<sup>90</sup> In the Trades Council

many discussions have taken place ...  
on issues arising out of the European

88. Ibid., 10.

89. Clifford Allen's diary, 14 August 1918, quoted in A. Marwick, Clifford Allen. The Open Conspirator (Edinburgh 1964), 51.

90. Sir James Crichton-Browne, F.R.S. spokesman for those hostile to the proposal, wrote: 'The German language forsooth, is not a language, but a hideous guttural throatage. As for German literature, that part of it which is not poisonous is of the most stodgy and indigestible description. We have Schiller, Goethe, Lessing and Kant of the ante-depravity period in Germany adequately represented in translations, and we don't want any more German Literature.' - quoted in Ewing, Sir Alfred Ewing, 211; on Crichton-Browne, who was apparently an otherwise enlightened man, see DNB, 2536.



conflict. In the main a general support has been given to the war and the policy of the Government. 91

With rare exceptions, the limits of acceptable action during wartime were defined by an understanding of the ~~NATIONAL~~ interest - albeit often an understanding which would have been rejected by government or employers: 'No military necessity, no national peril can justify punishment without trial—the annulling [*sic*] of the elementary rights of citizenship'.<sup>92</sup>

91. TC AR 1916, 12.

92. Ibid., 9.

## Chapter 9

### The Reorganisation of Labour 1917 - 1921

#### 9.1 The post-war political context.

With the end of the war came important changes in the context of labour politics. Some, covered in earlier chapters, we must here take as read: a loss of self-confidence among employers and within the state, a rise in union morale, a persistence of many of the factors which generated union strength. Two, however, demand further discussion. The institutional framework within which political mobilisation and action occurred was substantially altered. At the same time, the stock of principles by which political action could be legitimised underwent a major change. Together, these induced an uncertainty about the movement's political aims and methods. Let us look at these two changes of context.

First, the institutional framework: here there were a number of changes, some apparently contradictory. For the first time, from 1918, the parliamentary franchise was extended to include all working class men, and although this did not bring a commensurate Labour vote, the Party in Edinburgh was encouraged by the election of its first M.P., William Graham, for the Central division.<sup>1</sup> The local

1. Graham received 7159 votes, with a majority of 364 over his Coalition Liberal opponent, in a 45.2 per cent poll. It should be said, however, that results at the December 1918 election were not so encouraging elsewhere in the City: in Leith and in Edinburgh West, Labour candidates finished at the bottom of the poll, behind Liberals and Coalition Unionists, taking 14.6 per cent of a 53.0 per cent poll in Edinburgh West; 19.1 per cent of a 52.2 per cent poll in Leith.



government franchise remained a restricted one, and may account in part for the poor Labour showing when Town Council elections were resumed in 1919:<sup>2</sup> although the existing Labour councillors did not face re-election, they may have felt some weakening of their electoral sources of strength. After the Armistice, demobilisation proceeded apace, under the pressure of large-scale military and naval unrest and mutiny: towns and cities throughout the country were swamped with ex-servicemen, largely unemployed. They became, for a brief period, an important political constituency, wooed and feared by both Labour and government, and generating a number of aspirant representative organisations.<sup>3</sup> In particular, they were a target for the press, which was itself increasingly a target of government news management: certainly the Trades Council claimed that an 'active anti Trades Union campaign [was] being conducted by a certain section of the Scottish Press' in early 1919,<sup>4</sup> and a year later was referring to

a continuous crusade of slander ...  
in the Press and on many platforms  
for the purpose of alienating the ex-  
Service man from the Trade Unions. 5

At the same time the government was sponsoring the creation of 'a series of "non-political" and "independent" bodies, whose expressed object was to "combat Bolshevism", generally by means of extensive advertising, lecturing and agitation among the working class.'<sup>6</sup>

2. All six candidates were unsuccessful at the November elections, although each polled between 850 and 1509 votes.
3. See above, chapter 7; the various organisations and their evolution are described in Ward, 'Intelligence surveillance'.
4. TC minutes, 11 March 1919; on government news management, see Middlemas, 131, 145-6; Cowling, Impact of Labour, esp. 45-59.
5. TC AR 1920, 10.
6. S.White, 'Ideological hegemony and political control: the sociology of anti-Bolshevism in Britain, 1918-20', SLSHJ, 9, 3; White, 3-20, examines the formation, composition and support of many of these bodies; Middlemas, 141-51, discusses government strategy during this period. It is intriguing to note Lloyd George's 1920 comment: 'The real dangers to England do not emanate from Bolshevism. Bolshevism is almost a safeguard to society, for it infects all classes with a horror of what might happen if the present organisation of society is overthrown.' Quoted in Middlemas, 152.

At the same time, secondly, <sup>came</sup> a number of important changes in the stock of legitimising principles by which political action could be justified. Apart from those mentioned in chapter 7, two stand out: the end of the war, and the Russian revolutions of 1917. The ending of war weakened, and reoriented, the impact of the language of 'nation' and patriotism. During the war, and in general, the needs of the war effort had been accepted by the labour movement in Edinburgh. Thus in 1915, the Trades Council's executive had opposed the Derby Scheme, urging the Government

to compulsorily organise the nation for  
the purpose of more effectually prosecuting  
the War, 7

and there was no question but that support should be given to the war. (This did not, of course, exclude opposition to measures deemed by the government to be in the national interest: in most instances, labour support for the war was a negotiated support.) As the war continued, the Trades Council continued to be critical of its prosecution, but always critically supportive. Outright opposition seems to have been confined to the socialist political organisations. Even there, however, such views were not held by all; and certainly none in leading positions in Edinburgh's Labour Party seems to have been strongly anti-war. Of the three wartime councillors of whom we have information, for instance, one at least was strongly pro-war, and the other two volunteered for war service, although all three were ILP members.<sup>8</sup> In the main, those opposed

7. TC AR 1916, 2; the full Council overturned this by 'a small majority' in favour of the Derby scheme.
8. John A. Young (Councillor 1909-1920; Parliamentary candidate, Edinburgh West, 1918) was a member of the Scottish Socialist Federation, and apparently had a 'relation with the British Workers' league through A.B. Stewart' (ILP Central branch minutes, 20 September 1918). William Graham, (Councillor 1913-1919, M.P. for Edinburgh Central 1918-31), though a 'pacifist', volunteered for war service but was rejected on medical grounds (T.N. Graham, Willie Graham. The Life of the Rt. Hon. W. Graham (London, n.d. [c.1948], 60-61). Gerald Crawford (Councillor 1912-1920, 1926-1942) volunteered in 1914 and served until October 1917 when he was discharged as 'no longer physically fit for War Service' (letter, G.W. Crawford to J. McCorquodale, Secretary, ILP Central branch, 21 October 1917).



to the war seem to have been isolated, save when opposition to the war could be allied with criticism of an aspect of government war policy - as on many trade union questions, or on certain issues of civil liberty.

In peacetime, labour's political activities were no longer self-regulated by this over-riding sense of national interest. Many of the arguments by which members of the labour movement had justified their support for the war were now freed from this restraint, and assumed greater weight just because they had become important elements in labour's (negotiated) 'war aims'. Thus many popular definitions of the 'nation' now saw labour as an important estate: 'national' concepts could be used to legitimise actions which might have been supported by principles of fairness, but with less force. Thus the Trades Council could argue, in relation to government policies on housing, that

If the money is there to lend it is there to tax, and no national purpose is served by making the housing scheme a pretext for fixing on the backs of the workers an idle money-lending class and maintaining them in perpetuity. 9

But in part, too, notions of patriotism and the national interest had been justified by the ascription to the enemy of unacceptable political characteristics. Thus the war was fought, or so it was claimed, not against Germans so much as 'Kaiserism', a form of 'despotism'.<sup>10</sup> There was, here, a sense that certain essential freedoms were inherent in British nationality, akin perhaps to traditions of the 'free-born Englishman'.<sup>11</sup> Where such supportive beliefs could buttress the national effort in time of war, they might redefine it when the threat had passed.

9. TC AR 1919, 17; emphasis added.

10. See, e.g., TC AR 1917, 15.

11. Cp E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London 1963) esp. 77-101; see also V. Kiernan, 'Working Class and Nation in Nineteenth Century Britain', in M. Cornforth (ed.), Rebels and their Causes. Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton (London 1978), 123-39.

The Russian revolutions of 1917 were initially perceived in this light. 'A Revolution has taken place in Russia. Despotism has been overthrown and former war aims revoked'.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly the fact of revolution added to the self-confidence of the labour movement in Britain, and was a source of unease - occasionally verging on hysteria - among the middle class. But their impact amongst British labour was complicated in a number of ways. The October revolution raised questions of socialist method which were related (if not always straightforwardly) to debates within the British labour movement. The nature of Bolshevism was itself a matter of dispute: inevitably associated with the question of war aims, it was highly susceptible to interested interpretation. In due course it was complicated by allied intervention in the Civil War. Within the movement in Edinburgh, there is evidence of an attempt to use the spectre of Bolshevism to perpetuate, in peacetime, the alignments which had been supported by patriotism in war. This effort focused, it seems, on the Edinburgh branch of the National Socialist Party which had its origins in the pro-war faction of the BSP. Clearly such an organisation needed to find a new political justification after the war. In January 1919 its secretary attended a 'Committee appointed to consolidate Pro Ally Socialist activities in Scotland':<sup>13</sup> probably as a result of this came its decision to become a branch of the NSP. A battle then ensued: the national leadership of the Party, together with a group within the Edinburgh branch, appear to have seen Bolshevism as the issue which could replace the war as a political rationale for the Party

A circular and 3 collecting Cards were  
received from the Ex/ective/  
Committee/e/ of the N.S.P. [:]  
the Funds were required to kill  
Bolshevism. 14

12. TC AR 1917, 15; cp Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates, What Happened at Leeds (London 1917), passim.; S.White, 'Soviets in Britain: the Leeds Convention of 1917', Int.Rev. Soc.Hist. 19, 1974, 165-93.
13. SSF minutes, 10 January 1919: only on 26 January 1919 did the SSF technically declare itself a branch of the NSP.
14. NSP, Edin. branch, minutes, 9 March 1919.



The branch agreed to accept the cards by eight votes to six: but the attempt to persuade labour that Bolshevism was the major enemy was not to be easily achieved. When a member wrote a week later

intimating his resignation from the Branch owing to his disagreeing with the effort to collect money to fight Bolshevism,

the mood had changed: it was unanimously agreed to

write asking him to reconsider and intimating the Branch was in sympathy with him, 15

and by the early summer of 1919 the branch was responding positively to a BSP request 'to take joint action to protest against the Government action in Russia. Conscription, and espionage'.<sup>16</sup> Yet the attempt was made, and may have been part of a wider, government sponsored, strategy.<sup>17</sup>

Within the ILP we can see another aspect of the impact of the October revolution: initial fascination and curiosity, tempered by an apprehension about method; but in the course of time providing a partial support for a re-assessment of political method. Just four months after the Bolshevik revolution, the Central branch endorsed a resolution protesting against attacks on the Bolsheviks made by Labour leaders:

It is up to the rank and file of the ILP to make ourselves felt and to insist that the ILP shall rally to the cause of the Bolsheviks, which is the cause of International Socialism. Their methods may not be our methods, but their cause is ours. 18

15. Ibid., 16 March 1919.

16. Ibid., 22 June 1919.

17. The evidence for this latter suggestion is small, and the conclusion must therefore be very tentative. A prominent member of the branch, Cllr. J.A. Young, was attacked at a meeting of the ILP Central branch (of which he was also a member) for being a member of the SSF and associated with the British Workers' League: it was even implied that the latter might put him forward as a parliamentary candidate for Edinburgh Central. See ILP Central branch minutes, 20 September, 18 October, 15 November 1918. On the BWL, see R. Douglas, 'The National Democratic Party and the British Workers' League, Hist.J. 15, 1972, 533-52.

18. Letter, G.J. Huckle, Secretary, Cambridge ILP to Secretary, ILP Central branch, 24 March 1918: the letter asked for approval and the forwarding of a resolution, and is endorsed 'Sent 23/4/18': this I take to imply support for the sentiments expressed in the letter.

At much the same time the branch ordered twelve copies of a BSP book, 'The Bolshevik, etc.'; by July it was ordering 156 copies of Lenin's pamphlet, 'Lessons of the Russian Revolution,' also from the BSP.<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of the war sympathetic curiosity began to be associated with concern at allied intervention in Russia;<sup>20</sup> when the war ended intervention was no longer an issue clouded by the demands of patriotism. In January 1919 a 'Hands Off Russia' Conference was called, to which the Central branch sent a delegate:<sup>21</sup> in the following months the Edinburgh 'Hands Off Russia' Committee began to make an impact on both trade unions and political organisations. Although, according to one of its members, the Edinburgh Committee was

a hole-and-corner organisation ...  
run by a little group of engineers  
who worked in Rosyth dockyard, mostly  
Englishmen transferred from Portsmouth, 22

it ensured that the issue of intervention in Russia were constantly raised.<sup>23</sup> The outbreak of the Russo-Polish war in April 1920 gave

19. ILP Central branch minutes, 19 April, 19 July 1918: Lessons of the Russian Revolution is reprinted in V.I. Lenin, Selected Works, vol. 2, 207-21; it was written between the February and October revolutions. 'The Bolshevik, Etc.'s identity is unclear: it may have been a special issue of The Call.
20. On 16 August 1918 ILP Central branch agreed to send four delegates to a Plebs League discussion on allied intervention: minutes, 16 August 1918.
21. ILP Central branch minutes, 31 January 1919: these minutes are undated, but their date is clear from their position in the minute book, and the pattern of the meetings. Where the Conference was held is unclear: a London 'Hands Off Russia' Committee was set up in January 1919, and although the national committee was not established until the middle of the year, it is likely that an Edinburgh committee was also formed early in the year. Cp J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, vol. I, Formation and Early Years, 1919-1924 (London 1968), 78-9; L.J. MacFarlane, '"Hands Off Russia," British Labour and the Russo-Polish War, 1920', Past and Present, 38, 1967, 126-52.
22. F. Douglas, 'Commotion in the Capital-2', Evening Dispatch, 9 August 1955.
23. See e.g., TC minutes 1 April, 6 July, 9 September 1919; NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes, 13 April 1919, 1 February 1920; NSP Edin. branch minutes 23 June, 27 July, 12 December 1919; 4 April 1920; ILP Edin. Central branch minutes, 19 June 1919.



the Committee further impetus, and showed that sympathy for the revolution was widespread. 'It held crowded meetings on Sunday night in the old Pringles Picture House ...,'<sup>24</sup> and further trade union support was won.<sup>25</sup> And when, in July, the tide turned against the Poles and British involvement against Russia seemed a real possibility, the Labour Party was able to mobilise and threaten 'direct action': a telegram from Arthur Henderson claimed the risk of war was 'extremely menacing', and urged

local parties immediately organise  
citizen demonstrations against  
interventions and supply of men,  
munitions. Demand peace negotiations,  
immediate raising blockade, resumption  
trade relations. Send resolutions  
Premier and Press, deputise local MPs. 26

The apparent achievement of Labour's action in early August 1920 (it was widely held that this had prevented British intervention) both indicates how widespread was sympathy with the Russian revolution, and linked this sympathy with popular revulsion at the prospect of further war. 'Primarily it was war weariness that sustained the "Hands Off Russia" agitation', Fred Douglas recalled:<sup>27</sup> but if this was an important motive, war weariness alone could not have 'packed' the Usher Hall on 22 August to hear William Gallacher's report of his visit to Moscow as a delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International.<sup>28</sup> By the second half of 1920, Russia

24. Douglas, 'Commotion', Evening Dispatch 9 August 1955.

25. The NUR No.1 branch agreed to affiliate (Minutes, 30 May 1920); the Press and Machinemen pressed the Trades Council to send delegates to a HORC Conference (TC minutes 18 May 1920).

26. T & LC minutes, 6 August 1920 (Special EC meeting).

27. Douglas, Evening Dispatch 9 August 1955; cp R. Palme Dutt's comment that it was 'not essentially a revolutionary class-issue but simply an expression of war-weariness and horror at being dragged into another war,' The Communist, 19 August 1920, quoted in S. White, 'Labour's Council of Action 1920,' Journal of Contemporary History 9, 1974, 113.

28. On the Usher Hall Meeting, see T & LC minutes, 17 August 1920, Douglas, Evening Dispatch, 9 August 1955; for accounts of Gallacher's visit to Moscow, see W. Gallacher, Revolt on the Clyde (London 1936) 250-54; The Rolling of the Thunder (London 1947), 7-21; Challinor, J.S. Clarke, 57-67.

was the object of fascination and solidarity from virtually all sections of the labour movement: the Trades and Labour Council's Executive, which encompassed a wide spectrum of political attitudes, accepted an invitation to appear on the platform of the Gallacher meeting.<sup>29</sup>

These changes in institutional and motivational context left Labour facing a post-war political world that was both altered and uncertain. We should, perhaps, summarise the effect of the changes induced over the wartime period: the imperatives of war had upset many of the alignments and perspectives of pre-war labour politics; but they had also provided the basis and context for the development of new perspectives, and the construction of new allegiances. These perspectives and allegiances had been subject to change and strain, particularly as union strength grew: but, broadly, they had held successfully. The Russian revolution, and the end of the war, again altered the context of politics so that wartime perspectives and alliances were no longer relevant - or, at least, required to be justified in different terms.

The labour movement, however, could come to terms with these new circumstances only in the light of its members' understandings and experiences. In previous chapters we distinguished two trends of thought held within the labour and socialist movement during the war: one focused on the wartime role of the state, drawing credence from its prominence, and from the movement's engagement with it; the other focused on the political potentialities of industrial organisation, and was the stronger for the trade unions' wartime advances. No clear lines should be drawn between these trends, for individuals drew on both; during the immediate post-war years these two trends cut across the entire labour movement, from right to left, so that - for a brief period - strategic debate occurred as much within each as between the two. In these circumstances, mobilisation could be achieved which transcended the 'left/right' division: this

29. T & LC minutes, 17 August 1920.



was possible where there were principles which legitimised specific forms of action, but which were held in common across the political spectrum of labour. Some such principles, of course, commonly exist: our claim is that, during the immediate post-war years, their ability to promote significant common action across the political spectrum was unusually great, for two reasons. Firstly, the beliefs which had underlain the political allegiances of wartime had not yet been replaced effectively: political alignments within the movement were thus, to some extent, in the melting-pot. Second, for reasons we have explored in earlier chapters, during the war a number of notions commonly associated with 'profit', notably those closely related to 'efficiency' and 'organisation', were raised in status: these principles could legitimise action - particularly institutional change - across a wide range of opinion.

We can best examine this process by recounting the histories of three important institutional changes: the new constitution of the Labour Party in 1918, the amalgamation of Trades Council and Labour Party in 1920, and the restructuring of Marxist organisation between 1918 and 1921 (which is often seen as culminating in the formation of the Communist Party).

## 9.2 Edinburgh labour and the 1918 constitution

In the historiography of the Labour Party - as in its lore - 1918 figures as a momentous year. The reason is not simply that the constitution agreed in that year is, in large part, still with us: two of its aspects have been stressed. On the one hand, especially when considered with the new programme, Labour and the New Social Order, it 'unequivocally committed the Labour Party to Socialist objectives'.<sup>30</sup> On the other, the constitution transformed the Labour Party from a loose federation of affiliated

30. Cole, History of the Labour Party, 56, see also Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, 60-61; Coates, Labour Party and Struggle for Socialism, 14-15.

organisations into a centralised, nationally cohesive Party with its own individual members, organised in local constituency parties and subject to central party discipline. 31

In recent years both these assertions have been qualified. It has been suggested that the socialist commitment was illusory or irrelevant,<sup>32</sup> largely because 'Clause 4, the "socialist objective", was inserted in a Constitution that confirmed the triumph of the unions and the defeat of Socialists,'<sup>33</sup> and, 'the unions', having gained control, 'were not much interested in socialism.'<sup>34</sup> On this view, Clause 4 was designed to provide 'a rallying point around which the adherents of different ideologies and the representatives of different interests'<sup>35</sup> could assemble, without committing themselves to anything very significant.

Moving from historians' interpretations - largely grounded in national Labour records - to the views of contemporaries in the Edinburgh labour movement, three main points stand out. Firstly, although in the event 'Clause 4' may have become 'a rallying point', there is no evidence that it acted as such during the process of agreeing the new constitution. Second, there was little desire, on the part of trade unions, to control the Labour Party: if there was a struggle for control, it was largely between political factions, and not significantly based on union allegiances. Nevertheless, thirdly, although the new constitution seems to have evoked little enthusiasm outside the Labour Party itself, it was widely imagined to be a good thing simply for reasons of organisational efficiency. Let us examine these points in more detail.

In view of the significance since invested in its passing, the apparent unimportance of the 'Socialist' 'Clause 4' in discussion of

31. Miliband 60; see also McKenzie, British Political Parties, 482.

32. Cp R. Barker, Education and Politics 1900-51: a study of the Labour Party (Oxford 1974), esp. 34; R. McKibbin, Evolution of the Labour Party, esp. 91-106.

33. Ibid., 244.

34. Ibid., 103.

35. Harrison, 'The War Emergency Workers' National Committee', 259; cp S. Beer, Modern British Politics (London 1969), 127.



the new constitution is remarkable. There is no record of its having even been mentioned, let alone discussed, at the Labour Party's Edinburgh branch's meetings in late 1917 and early 1918.<sup>36</sup> The ILP did not look at this aspect;<sup>37</sup> neither did the Trades Council.<sup>38</sup> The Edinburgh branch's delegate, in his report, concentrated on 'the big question of the Conference - the New Constitution': but he did not mark 'Clause 4' as worthy of mention.<sup>39</sup> This resounding silence is indicative of two facts: that the socialist objective, at least in the language in which it was couched, was uncontroversial; but, by the same token, that it was not judged to be an effective 'rallying point', at least by those active in the labour movement at the time it was passed.<sup>40</sup> If the Constitution was important, this was for other reasons, in the main.

Although, again, there is some evidence that the 1918 Constitution increased the degree of control which unions could exercise

36. Edinburgh branch, Labour Party, minutes, passim.
37. ILP Central branch minutes, 17 December 1917, and passim.
38. In part, no doubt, the Trades Council's failure to record the Nottingham Conference at all reflects the timing of its annual reports: the Council's year ended on 31 March, so the Executive's report for 1917/18, which might have been expected to comment on such a development, may have been written prior to the Conference (which was held on 23-25 January 1918); while by the following year it would have been overwhelmed by sheer pressure of events. On the other hand, the Council's minutes for 1918 are also silent on the constitution issue.
39. Edin. Labour Party AR 1917-18, 3.
40. There is one interesting instance of an attempt to use the language of clause 4 in another context: a motion to alter the NUR rules to include an aim: 'To secure for Railwaymen the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable [sic] administration and distribution thereof that may [sic] be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production' (NUR No.1 branch minutes, 15 September 1918). But there is, unfortunately, no indication as to whether the motion was passed; and it should be remembered that the active membership of the branch was, at this time, aggressively socialistic in language: indeed, this formulation seems mild in comparison to several other motions agreed during 1918-20.

over the Labour Party nationally, there is little sign that this formed part of the motives for union support for the change in Edinburgh. We saw in table 8.1 that, in so far as the Trades Council embodied trade union opinion, its involvement in the Labour Party was suggestive of loose supervision, rather than close control. Nevertheless, this loose supervision was real: and in the pre-1918 Edinburgh Labour Party it was complemented by a somewhat deeper involvement of other trade unionists. Table 9.1 shows that,

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Table 9.1      Trade Union and Political Affiliation of Officers and Executive Committee Members of the Labour Party, Edinburgh branch, 1917 - 1918

<u>Office:</u>	<u>Name:</u>	<u>Affiliations identified:</u>
<u>Chairman</u>	T.Hamilton	Workers' Union Rosyth No. 3 National Guilds League Edin. group president.
<u>Treasurer</u>	P.Gray	Postmen's Federation.
<u>Secretary</u>	A.S.Wylie	ILP Central branch; Workers' Union District Secretary.
<u>Executive Committee:</u>		
	A.Cameron	Painters, Central Branch
	J.Grassick	National League of the Blind, ILP Central branch.
	F.Halliday	NAUL No.292 branch.
	W.Hodgson	Corporation Workers.
	A.Pollock	(unidentified).
	J.Rollo	NUR No.1 branch.

Sources: Labour Party, Edin.branch AR 1917/18; TC ARs; ILP minutes and correspondence; NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes; NAUL No 292 branch minutes.

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even before the 1918 Constitution was brought into force in Edinburgh, union members had effective control within it. To be sure, some - perhaps a majority - had political links, with the ILP and so on; but they were trade union delegates in the main. So we cannot safely maintain that union activists felt any need to win control of the Labour Party, nor that they perceived 'socialism' as an activity of the middle-class, from which union members were largely excluded.



Trade unionists did not need to wrest control of the Labour Party: they already held it.

If, indeed, there was a struggle for control of the Labour Party in Edinburgh, it was between those who had already identified themselves with avowedly 'political' groupings: even this, however, seems not to have surfaced until after the new constitution was agreed. It was recognised that this would 'vitally affect ... the position of the Local Labour Parties':<sup>41</sup> in particular, the proposed individual membership was an implicit threat to the ILP's role. This was not an issue within the Edinburgh ILP in late 1917, but during 1918 the implications became clearer. Early in 1918, the Edinburgh Labour Party appointed a new secretary: James J. Pottinger was a member of the SSF, and seems to have pursued its interests as secretary.<sup>42</sup> This meant the ILP's influence was weakened during a crucial year. The new secretary was assiduous in upholding the constitution of the Labour Party to counter the interests of the ILP, which was, of course, distrusted by the labour 'patriots'. The ILP, apparently attempting to increase its hold over the Labour Party, began to press for the appointment of an election agent for William Graham, the parliamentary candidate whom it had nominated (and whom the Labour Party had subsequently adopted). Having received an unhelpful response from Pottinger,<sup>43</sup> the ILP wrote again,

requesting a joint conference of ...  
 [the ILP] Executive and the Executive  
 of the local Labour Party, along with  
 Mr. Shaw, the Scottish Secretary [of  
 the Labour Party] "to consider Councillor  
 Graham's candidature for the Central  
 division and to make definite  
 arrangements." <sup>44</sup>

Pottinger's response was to point out that the ILP, as nominators, were

41. Letter, Edin. Labour Party to Secretary, ILP Central branch, 17 December 1917.
42. When James J. Pottinger resigned as Labour Party Secretary in 1919, the SSF wrote to him 'thanking him for his work for the Federation' (SSF minutes, 10 January 1919: emphasis added).
43. Letter, James J. Pottinger, Secretary, Edin. LP to M. Marcus, Interim Secretary, ILP Central branch, 30 July 1918.
44. Letter, J.J. Pottinger to J. McCorquodale, Secretary, ILP Central branch, 27 June 1918.

'responsible for 75 per cent of the expenses' of an agent, along with some other requirements, but that the appointment, control, and salary of the agent would lie with the Labour Party. 'That, briefly, is the position, and a conference on the question is therefore scarcely necessary,'<sup>45</sup> was the crisp conclusion.

If, then, we leave aside the motives of those who formulated the new constitution in London, and seek the motives of those who accepted it - not always enthusiastically, but without controversy - in Edinburgh, neither 'clause 4' nor a need for greater union control is adequate. When Henderson argued for the adoption of the new Party constitution at the Nottingham Conference, he stressed the need for both 'a broader organisational basis and a more clearly defined objective' if the party was to take advantage of the expanded electorate after the war.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, the latter was not taken up in Edinburgh: but the former struck a chord. In his report on the Conference debate, the Edinburgh branch's delegate concentrated on Henderson's 'very clever speech' on

the big question ... - The New Constitution. He/Henderson/ pled for its adoption on several grounds: the after-war situation, the necessity for broadening the base of the Party, the possibility of a General Election about September of this year, and the Executive's determination to place 400 Parliamentary candidates in the field. 47

These were thoroughly organisational motives: although the delegate was an enthusiastic guild socialist, he did not even mention the new clause 4. Whether this reflected his own outlook, or deference to his readers, is unimportant: in the later war years, reorganisation in the interest of efficiency was hard to oppose, and the advocates of the new constitution drew strength from this fact. The Edinburgh Labour

45. Ibid.

46. Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1918, 98-104; there is an extended precis and discussion of the speech in McKenzie, 475-8, from which the quotation is taken.

47. Edin. LP AR, 1917-1918, 3. The imminence of a General Election was one of Henderson's constant themes, especially in correspondence with local Labour organisations, during late 1917 and early 1918.



Party had believed that the 1918 Conference was 'the most important ... yet held, owing to the discussion on draft Constitution';<sup>48</sup> it had largely failed to persuade the local labour movement, however. For the latter, the new constitution was simply uncontroversial.

### 9.3 The formation of the Trades and Labour Council

If the 1918 Labour Party constitution was given legitimacy by the strength of notions of organisation and efficiency, this was in an essentially negative sense: it was difficult to oppose, for rationality seemed on its side. But, of course, in 1917 the Labour Party was peripheral to labour politics in Edinburgh: only the prospect of an election (repeatedly raised by Henderson in correspondence with local parties) kept it alive. If, however, we were to seek one constitutional development whose significance was generally accepted in these immediate post-war years in Edinburgh's labour movement, we should find it in the 1920 amalgamation of the Trades Council with the local Labour Party, forming a Trades and Labour Council. This was controversial, for a number of reasons, but its importance was widely acknowledged, even by its opponents.

We have seen that the Trades Council's political role had been enhanced during the war years: in particular, it had - perforce - begun to encroach on areas, such as working class representation on public bodies, for which the Labour Party had been established. This raised questions about the relationship between the two organisations. Between 1917 and 1920 virtually all the trade union branches affiliated to the Edinburgh Labour Party were also affiliated to the Trades

48. Labour Party, Edin. branch minutes, 13 December 1917.

Council: the exceptions were insignificantly small.<sup>49</sup> And just as, in the main, union branches affiliated to the Trades Council in order to further their interests, so they affiliated to the Labour Party for similar reasons. It was, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that, in the course of a discussion on the new Constitution at a Labour Party meeting in December 1917,

Mr. Wylie moved that Local Trades' Council and branches of the Labour Party amalgamate as advised [in the draft rules circulated from head office, since]... at present there was much wasted energy and overlapping, which could be saved by amalgamation. 50

Initially, there was little enthusiasm from the Trades Council's side: perhaps because, at least during the war, it was the Labour Party's energy which was being wasted. The Labour Party had 'hope[d] to see effected, during the coming year [1918], an amalgamation with the Trades Council.'<sup>51</sup> But not until August 1918 did the two executives even meet, although they did then agree (after extended discussion) to recommend amalgamation in principle.<sup>52</sup> Within the Trades Council, however, the proposal encountered significant opposition. The Executive's recommendation was endorsed by 37 votes to 14.<sup>53</sup> Another fourteen months passed before plans were finalised - which suggests less than wholehearted commitment - and even then the first meeting of the new body was not to be held until April 1920.<sup>54</sup>

There were a number of reasons for this opposition and delay. Firstly, there was some mistrust of the Labour Party within the trade union movement. In 1917/18 of the 80 union branches affiliated to the

49. 20 unions were affiliated to the Edin. Labour Party in 1917/18; 24 in 1919/20. Of these, those not affiliated to the Trades Council were the Sawmillers and the No.1 branch of the Workers Union (in both years) and the NUR No.1 branch (in 1919/20). The Sawmillers and Workers Union branches were both small (on the basis of affiliation fees, the smallest unions affiliated); the reasons behind the Railwaymen's disaffiliation from the Trades Council were highly unusual.

50. Labour Party, Edin. branch minutes, 13 December 1917.

51. Labour Party, Edin. branch Annual Report, 1917-18, 2.

52. TC minutes, 27 August 1918.

53. Ibid.

54. TC minutes, 14 October 1919; TC AR 1920, 13.



Trades Council; just 18 were affiliated to the local Labour Party; two years later the figures were 82 and 21 respectively.<sup>55</sup> Whilst the bulk of the remainders were content to be associated with the Labour Party, at least two branches withdrew from the Council on account of the amalgamation, and one was explicit about the political reason for its decision.<sup>56</sup> Some of this reserve may have been intensified by the Party's adoption of a socialist programme in 1918, for it is by no means clear that even those unions which were locally affiliated to the Labour Party were unanimous about socialism. When the rubber workers' branch of the NAUL set down its reasons for affiliating to the Party, it also pointed, by omission, to possible reservations about a fully socialist programme:

That this Branch recognising the benefit that Labour Representation in Parliament has been in securing by Act of Parliament conditions commensurate with the cost of living, are of opinion that Labour Representation in the House of Commons is essential to the continuance of direct Government control of Wages agreements, and to this end are resolved to affiliate with the Local [sic] Labour Party. 57

Similarly, the Clerks affiliated to the local Labour branch in early 1918, but their commitment did not extend to supporting a demonstration to 'save the New Democracies in Europe' - despite its having been called by the Party.<sup>58</sup> For some union branches - if not necessarily for the politically active trade unionists - political action had a meaning short of some definitions of socialism.

Secondly, what was commonly referred to as an 'amalgamation' was in reality also a thorough reorganisation of the Labour Party in line with the new rules. As the merger took place, so at the same time the Labour Party was shifting from a haphazard structure ( a

55. TC ARs 1918, 25-8; 1920, 27-31; LP ARs 1917-18, 8; 1919/20 in TC AR 1920, 22-3.

56. TC minutes, 23 March 1920 (ASLE&F); 2 November 1920 (Amalgamated Portmanteau, Bag, and Fancy Leather Workers' Trade Society).

57. NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 21 April 1918.

58. NUC Edin. branch minutes, 4 March, 17 June, 4 November 1918, 14 July 1919.

series of ward committees under the aegis of the Edinburgh branch), to a more contralised three tier structure, in which divisional Labour parties in each constituency superseded the single Edinburgh branch, but were all subject to the authority of the Trades and Labour Council. The secretary of the local branch gave a lucid account of how

in a city which is divided into several constitutuencies, a Local Labour Party must be formed in each constituency. Each of these Local Parties are entitled to five representatives on the Central Labour Party, which would be the controlling authority for the whole area. 59

But he confessed that he found it 'somewhat difficult to explain', and expected to have to meet affilated organisations' representatives in order to do so.<sup>60</sup> One union branch committee thought the Draft Constitution and Rules 'were complicated', and put consideration off until the next meeting<sup>61</sup> - where, 'after considerable discussion it was agreed ... that the letter "lie on the table"'.<sup>62</sup>

The sheer complexity of the new structure, and the length of the rulebook - 'Set D (pp.45-53) in the set of rules applicable to cities like Edinburgh', wrote the Edinburgh Party's secretary<sup>63</sup> -, were of course only symptoms of the view that organisational efficiency was to be derived from a centralised and hierarchical structure. In the course of time, this structure proved to have both strengths and drawbacks: it required an increase in the resources available at the upper levels of the Party structure, and an acceptance of a subordinate role by the members of local Labour parties and affiliated bodies. In the event, commitment to reorganisation, and to the Labour idea, was not adequate to carry through the original plans. Very likely, amalgamation was initially intended to allow Trades Council and Labour Party together to sustain a central organisation which was

59. Letter, J.J.Pottinger to J.McCorquodale, 27 June 1918.

60. Ibid.

61. NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 17 July 1919.

62. Ibid., 7 August 1919.

63. Letter, Pottinger to McCorquodale, 27 June 1918.



beyond each alone: as the Labour Party had it:

Whether a scheme of amalgamation matures or not, the Party must be prepared to take its place in the forefront of the political life of the City, &, in this connection, we would emphasise the need for a full-time Secretary-Organiser with an office & the necessary clerical staff. 64

Neither, however, appears to have been prepared for the degree of opposition - not, indeed, to the principle, but to the cost. The original proposal was for an affiliation fee to the joint Council of 1s. per member per year.<sup>65</sup> The current Trades Council affiliation fee was based on a scale which, though far from simple, ranged from less than 1d. per member (for very large branches), to a maximum of 4d. (for the smaller branch).<sup>66</sup> One branch, 500 strong, paying £3 annually to the Trades Council on the old scale, feared it would have to pay £25 instead, and its

delegates were instructed ... to question the affiliation fees, and to vote down everything higher than 6d. per member. 67

As unions were represented on the Council in proportion to their size (not to their financial contribution), we need not be surprised that a fee of 4d per member was settled upon:<sup>68</sup> what is remarkable - and a testament to the strength of the belief in the need for reorganisation - is that 1s. was ever seriously suggested.

The Trades Council's Executive gave, in 1920, a heartening view of its diligence:

At first the combination of the two great forces seemed to bristle with difficulties, financial and otherwise, but after an incredible amount of work on the part of the Joint-Executives, the scheme became an accomplished fact. 69

- 64. Edin. LP Annual Report 1917/18, 2.
- 65. NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, 23 June 1919.
- 66. TC AR 1919, 55.
- 67. NUC minutes, 23 June 1919.
- 68. TC AR 1920, 55.
- 69. Ibid., 13.

But even incredible amounts of work will only prevail if their purpose is seen as relevant. The great advantage possessed by the advocates of amalgamation was that their opponents had no argument which grappled with the major issues confronting the labour movement. Indeed, the impression is often given that there was no legitimate basis for opposition to the reorganisation - those who criticised it on financial grounds do not seem to have coupled their case with arguments that centralisation was a mistake, for example, or that it was more important to strengthen the various affiliated unions and parties. It is almost as though the opponents were ashamed of their arguments. Conversely, the arguments for reorganisation were strong; based upon the strength of notions of administrative efficiency, and hierarchical structures. There was, for instance, an assumed congruence between the 'Amalgamation' of Edinburgh with Leith ('any measure which tends towards efficiency, economy, and the prevention of overlapping should receive ... [the workers'] heartiest support')<sup>70</sup> and 'Our Own Amalgamation':<sup>71</sup> the two items were juxtaposed in the Trades Council's Annual Report.

As in the trade union sphere, this reflected a simplistic view of organisation: not only was efficient organisation necessarily mechanistic - highly centralised and hierarchical; efficiency was a characteristic of the organisation, and not of the relationship between the organisation and its environment. Thus the new structure was seen as an advance which transcended the strategic divergences within the movement:

With regard to this new machine, it is unnecessary to embark on any academic disquisition regarding principles or policy. Whatever views on these may be held by the various units of the new body, we are all agreed that the need for a transformation of our system of government is becoming more insistent and more clamant than at any time in our previous history. 72

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.



This 'effective machine' was to be required to give 'adequate expression to the aims, the hopes, and the aspirations of the working class of this city':<sup>73</sup> it was to be capable of carrying through whatever policy the movement required of it:

Trade Unions and Socialist Societies will not come to us to be told what wants doing. They will come to get things done. They must forge the bolts: we are commissioned with the duty of firing them. For long the worker has sighed for the two-edged weapon, that would enable him to cut his way to freedom. The tool is here; we place it in your hands. Emancipation awaits you. <sup>74</sup>

#### 9.4 Restructuring Marxist organisation

As the unity of the post-war labour movement was built, in essence, on the submergence of argument about method or strategy beneath an apparent unity on organisation, so also with Marxism. The political differences which, in pre-war years, had led to the growth of a variety of organisations did not disappear; rather, having been reassessed in the light of wartime experiences, they were outweighed by a belief in the value of organisational unity.

We have seen that the Bolshevik revolution won widespread support within the British labour movement. But there is a difference between sympathy, even vicarious pride at working class achievement, and acceptance of Bolshevik methods. Bolshevik success raised questions of socialist strategy in a strong form, and lent legitimacy to methods involving some element of 'direct action' or force. But its impact was confused by virtue of the revolution's being perceived in the light of varying conceptions of the British experience. James Hinton has argued that

The enthusiasm with which sections of the left took up and developed the soviet idea in Britain is to be

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

explained not only by understandable elation over the Russian Revolution, but also, and primarily, by the fact that this idea answered to a real theoretical need felt by British revolutionaries as a result of their own domestic experience. 75

In relation to the Workers' Committee movement, Hinton's case is persuasive: 'attempts to spell out the potentialities apparent in the Workers' Committees resulted in equating them with Soviets.'<sup>76</sup> But this experience was limited to a section of the left: in Scotland, it was concentrated in the engineering industries of Clydeside. Other sections interpreted the revolution in the light of different experiences, and these had not always generated other 'theoretical needs'.

Some elements of Edinburgh's labour movement, of course, were theoretically predisposed to see the revolution in industrial terms by a background in syndicalism or industrial unionism. For there were other forms of wartime industrial experience than the workers' committees: to many who had not experienced the latter, the 'soviet idea' did not always appear relevant, or even comprehensible. There is evidence in Edinburgh that the soviet idea had a strong impact on those who had been involved in the workers' committees of the engineering industry. Inside the ILP Central branch, for instance, it was Bob Foulis, an ironmoulder and leader of the engineering and ship-building workers, who pressed the Bolshevik case in 1918.<sup>77</sup> The 'Hands Off Russia' Committee was run by a group of engineers, and seems to have been started, in early 1919, during just those months when the Forth Workers' Committee (never the strongest such body) was

75. Hinton, First Shop Stewards Movement, 307.
76. Ibid.; on the soviets in Russia, see Anweiler, The Soviets, esp. 111-16, 125-7.
77. ILP Central branch minutes, 19 April 1918; on Foulis, see John McArthur's recollections in I. MacDougall (ed.), Militant Miners. Recollections of John McArthur, Buckhaven; and letters, 1924-26, of David Proudfoot, Methil, to G. Allen Hutt (Edinburgh 1981), 21; Douglas, 'Commotion', Evening Dispatch, 11 August 1955; G. Brown, 'The Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland, 1918-1929. The Politics of Five Elections' (Ph.D thesis, University of Edinburgh 1981), 115-6.



on the wane: it may be that the two organisations shared active members.<sup>78</sup> Certainly a critic found the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee 'more anxious for the formation of Soviets here than anything else.'<sup>79</sup> But on the railways sympathy for the revolution's methods reflected another view of what was important. It demonstrated the need for 'a General Strike to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat in this country,'<sup>80</sup> to 'organise our forces',<sup>81</sup> to 'line up with all workers to take hold the means of wealth production'.<sup>82</sup> This is the language of syndicalist industrial unionism: not of soviets or workers' committees. Lacking strong workplace organisation, the soviet idea answered no 'theoretical needs.' (Nor should be ignore an important fact: in those sectors where union organisation was but recently established, the revolution's relevance was unlikely to be perceived in industrial terms - it was just too remote. Neither the Clerks nor the Rubber Workers showed any real sympathy for the revolution, and certainly do not seem to have perceived it as having any relevance to their organisation.)<sup>83</sup>

The Russian revolution could, of course, be interpreted in another perspective: by those who, impressed by the strength of the British state during the war, saw it as a potential source of power for socialists, and felt that labour's failure to win control of it was partly due to organisational factors. For such as these the lessons of the revolution were political, rather than industrial. Through the soviets, or the Bolshevik party, the Russian working class had been more efficiently organised than its counterpart in Britain, and had been able to advance just because it had won state power. The Bolsheviks had broken with the 'compromising' and

78. Douglas, 'Commotion, Evening Dispatch, 9 August 1955; Hinton, First Shop Stewards Movement, 270-71, recounts the decline of the workers' committees from 1919.

79. NSP Edin. branch minutes, 2 May 1920: the delegate was reporting on meetings 'some time' earlier, having been ill.

80. NUR Edin. No 1 branch minutes, 10 November 1918.

81. Ibid., 7 July 1918.

82. Ibid., 29 September 1918.

83. NUC Edinburgh branch minutes, passim, and esp. 23 September 1918; NAUL No. 292 branch minutes, passim, esp. 20 May 1920.

'treacherous role' of the Mensheviks and Soviet-Revolutionaries.<sup>84</sup>  
 Now lessons such as these would also be perceived in relation to established political views: thus, for instance, it may have been possible to have seen the importance of state power and efficient organisation clearly demonstrated, yet to have demurred at the Bolsheviks' attitudes to reform and the possibility of constitutional change (especially in relation to Britain). Certainly the Bolshevik experience seems to have been at least catalytic in inducing an element of Edinburgh's ILP to question the methods and organisation of labour politics: they began to press the ILP into debate with leftist organisations such as the SLP and to subscribe to their press;<sup>85</sup> they attacked those in the ILP who were pro-war, or who appeared in other ways to compromise with the state;<sup>86</sup> they attempted to promote common action between the ILP and various revolutionary organisations.<sup>87</sup> During 1918 and 1919, at least, they seem to have had considerable success: by the summer, a motion

to arrange an immediate Conference  
 of the Local I.L.P., B.S.P., S.L.P.,  
 B.S.I.S.L.P., and Communist Workers'  
 League with a view of consolidating  
 local Socialistic efforts

could be passed by 25 votes to 7.<sup>88</sup>

84. The quotations are from Lenin, 'Lessons of the Revolution' as reprinted in Selected Works, volume 2, 209-21. We know, of course, that this pamphlet was circulating in Edinburgh in English during the latter half of 1918 (ILP Central branch minutes, 19 July 1918).
85. ILP Central branch minutes; 7 March 1918 (subscription to The Socialist, an SLP newspaper), 22 March 1918 (debate with SLP 'That the ILP is worthy of working class support' proposed by R. Foulis, but rejected, 11 to 4), 14 January 1919. (agreed by 27 to 2 that 'it is desirable to have an open [ILP] platform for discussion from opponents', proposed by Foulis).
86. Ibid., 20 September 1918, 2, 9, 23 May 1919.
87. Ibid., 19 June, 1919.
88. Ibid., 16 May, 19 June 1919; on the national context of such developments, cp Dowse, Left in the Centre, 47-8; Marwick, 'The Independent Labour Party', esp. 84-92, 96-101; Klugmann, 25-38; Kendall, esp. 197-219, 269-70. By January 1920 the ILP in Scotland had voted for affiliation to the Third International by 151 votes to 28; this was overturned at the national conference in April 1920 by 472 to 206.



It is, of course, a mistake to see these perspectives on the Russian revolution as dividing Edinburgh's Marxists into two clear groups: rather, they identify sources of motive and understanding. For as the months passed after the Armistice events in Britain also led to political reassessments among revolutionary socialists. We can discern two main strands in this reassessment. On the one hand, the war and the months that followed it saw the growth of a number of organisations, largely issue-based, which brought Marxist socialists together to pursue common objectives. Defence of the revolution led, as we have seen, to the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee. The Forth Workers' Committee, which had led the 40 hours strike in Edinburgh, involved not only those with a background in the SLP: one of its leaders was a member of the ILP, and had been a Labour parliamentary candidate in 1918.<sup>89</sup> The history and economics class, run by the Central Labour College for Edinburgh District of the NUR, had for several years been taught by John S. Clarke, a leading member of the SLP: it had become a focal point of the railwaymen's revolutionary industrial unionism.<sup>90</sup> From 1916 the Labour College (or Plebs League) grew in the city, and its interpretations of Marxism broadened. <sup>91</sup> The Railwaymen's class was opened to members of other occupations. Other classes were started, with organisations like the Engineers and the ILP.<sup>92</sup> New tutors were found, by no means all of whom had backgrounds in the SLP.<sup>93</sup> In February 1920, what had become the Edinburgh District of the Scottish Labour College merged with the Marxian School of Economics,<sup>94</sup> leaving a single organisation for Marxist education in the city. Perhaps a consequence of this increased

89. Brown, 'Labour Party and Political Change', 115-6.

90. Millar, The Labour College Movement, 20.

91. J.H.Roberts, 'The National Council of Labour Colleges, - An Experiment in Workers' Education. A study of the growth of the Labour Colleges with particular reference to independent working class adult education in Scotland.' (M.Sc.thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1970); 40.

92. Ibid., 49; Plebs November 1917.

93. E.g., Tom Drummond (ILP, formerly SLP), James Clunie (BSP), J.P.M.Millar (ILP): Plebs December 1918, November 1920.

94. Roberts, 55.

intercourse between the various strands of Marxist thought - although by the same token, it must have made it easier - was a weakening of the internal cohesion of the various socialist parties. Within the ILP, for instance, a group began to identify with Marxism as well as - perhaps rather than - the Party itself. It began to attack another group which identified with the aims, and sometimes the organisation, of the NSP, and more generally on the ILP's right: one such attack is revealing. Euphemia Laing, a former suffragette later to become a Communist, moved the expulsion of Thomas Drummond Shiels (who liked to be referred to as 'Captain', and was to become a Labour councillor and MP) as

Mr. Shiels had taken office in the Edinburgh branch of the National Socialist Party, a party which had consistently opposed the policy of the I.L.P. throughout the War. 95

Drummond Shiels did not deny the facts: only that 'he had done nothing to violate the Constitution of the ILP'. The motion was narrowly defeated (by 36 votes to 33).<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, many members did not find membership of another party improper. Similarly, a division opened within the SLP, essentially between those who had been involved in the workers committees (and thus jointly with other Marxists in industrial conflict) and those who had remained in the older mould of SLP separatism.<sup>97</sup>

At the same time as the institutional identities and alignments of socialist politics were thus in flux, those revolutionary socialists whose outlooks were grounded in industrial experience found reason for reassessment. These reassessments varied, however, for post-war industrial experiences were not uniform. So far as Edinburgh is concerned, Marxist views had flourished in two main settings. In engineering and shipbuilding the shop stewards movement, never as strong in Edinburgh as on Clydeside, had suffered the national defeat of the early months of 1918, and had swung to

95. ILP Edin. Central branch minutes, 2 May 1919; the case had already been referred to the ILP's Divisional and National Advisory Councils (ILP NAC minutes, 6-7 March 1919). At the following meeting Shiels resigned but was also declared to have ceased to be a member 'automatically' by virtue of the 'International' section of the new ILP rules: the minutes were 'not adopted' by 31 votes to 7 (Central branch minutes, 9 May 1919).

96. Ibid., 2 May 1919.

97. Hinton, esp. 301-02; Challinor, British Bolshevism, 240-44; Kendall, 196, 198-201.



political agitation when industrial methods seemed to have failed.<sup>98</sup> By October the Forth Workers Committee had established an economics and industrial history class in conjunction with the Plebs League.<sup>99</sup> After the Armistice, the defeat of the Forty Hours strike further undermined the industrial support for the shop stewards' movement; yet at the same time - and of course just for a brief period - employers were able to undercut union militancy by offering concessions (in pay, hours and conditions) to official union leaders. And by 1920 the depression was beginning. In these circumstances, the thinking of the revolutionary shop stewards became, as it were, political rather than industrial: from workers' committees, the movements' leaders began, for instance, to propose the formation of 'social committees'.<sup>100</sup> They no longer perceived industry as providing a fundamental source of social power: if advances were to be made, it was necessary to mobilise power resources elsewhere. Hence they were prepared to participate in debate, and joint action, of the type we have described above.

Marxist views had also flourished among Edinburgh's railwaymen. Their wartime experiences, however, had been different from the engineers'. Government control and national negotiation, among other factors, had prevented the emergence of strong, unofficial, workplace organisation. During 1919 and 1920, however, the railwaymen moved back into the vanguard of industrial struggle. They were mobilised in national strikes. The victory of October 1919 was seen as a vindication of industrial unionism; and industrial action - solidarity action - as a realistic strategy for revolutionaries. Effort was therefore put into organising the local Triple Alliance.<sup>101</sup> But just as the Triple Alliance was fragile nationally, so in Edinburgh these efforts were often frustrated. At a local conference of the Alliance summoned in December 1919, 'only railwaymen turned up'.<sup>102</sup> Nearly three months later a Railwaymen's delegate was still reporting that 'The miners had not responded. As it stood', he continued, 'the

98. Hinton, 255-69.

99. Plebs, December 1918.

100. Hinton, 320-24.

101. Edin. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 7, 21 December 1919.

102. Ibid., 21 December 1919.

T.A. is largely a farce'.<sup>103</sup> At the same time the union's revolutionary elements came deeply to mistrust their national leaders; whom they saw as unwilling, for political reasons, to exploit industrial advantages to the full. 'Thomas and his political clap-trap had done our movement great harm.'<sup>104</sup> Gradually, however, they came to mix the language of syndicalism with a sense that some kind of political organisation was necessary. Thus a resolution in early 1920:

That Edinburgh No 1 branch NUR  
calls upon all railway workers to  
organise in a revolutionary  
political party and in one great  
Industrial Union of the working  
class in order to destroy the  
robber system, and to hold the  
means of wealth production .... <sup>105</sup>

( During 1920 this had no practical effect: the emphasis remained on industrial organisation, especially when autumn brought the prospect of a miners' strike. The No 1 branch demanded

a strike of NUR members ... in  
support of the miners if the  
Government compel them to strike.  
Failing a settlement in three days  
instruction be sent to each  
locality to take possession of  
Railways, Mines, etc and work them  
in the interest of the working class. <sup>106</sup>

Here is a classic call, in the syndicalist tradition, for a strike to be used for political ends. But as the months passed, and 1920 became 1921, the failures of the Triple Alliance became more numerous. The explanation was generally similar ('The dissension of Mr. Thomas and his wrecking tactics ...'),<sup>107</sup> but confidence began to wane. In these circumstances, the realisation of a need for political organisation bore

103. Ibid., 29 February 1920.

104. Ibid., 28 March 1920.

105. Ibid., 29 February 1920.

106. Ibid., 12 September 1920.

107. Ibid., 24 October 1920; cp 24 April, 8 May 1921: on the latter occasion, it was recorded that the local Triple Alliance strike committee 'condemns the procrastination, and the lack of courage displayed' by the national leaders.



fruit.

In June 1921, just seven weeks after the Triple Alliance's final fiasco ('Black Friday'), the No. 1 branch of the Edinburgh Railwaymen agreed to set up 'its own political Committee with a view to running its own Municipal and other Council candidates.'<sup>108</sup>

The Committee is the political expression of a very large and active branch of railway workers. It will oppose other political bodies in so far as such bodies do not express the interests of the working-class, and whose [sic] political outlook is not that of the class struggle. It will defend, and work for the Industrial development of the workers' organisations, and stands for the unity of all workers, on behalf of all workers against the common enemy - the capitalist class. 109

So the realisation of a need for political organisation was interweaved with the syndicalist tradition.

The peculiarity of the revolutionary movement on the railways should not, however, obscure the central reality: the weakening of the industrial militancy was leading to a receptiveness, among those who regarded themselves as revolutionaries, to political debate and action. The weakening cohesion of many of the political parties of the left was allowing political strategy to be considered in a new context; and there developed, in the Labour Colleges, and the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee, especially, institutions which - though for limited purposes - regrouped Marxists within the labour movement without limitation to any particular party. Some indication of the impact of Marxism on Edinburgh labour, and more importantly of the extent to which intercourse developed among the Marxist left, can be gained from the growth of the Colleges in Edinburgh. Although in mid-1917 Edinburgh took more copies of Plebs than any other city, there was just the single class based on the NUR.<sup>110</sup> In the autumn a

108. Ibid., 5 June 1921.

109. Ibid., 14 August 1921: this is the 'Platform' of the Committee.

110. Plebs, June 1917.

branch of the Plebs League was started:<sup>111</sup> the District Organiser began to attend union meetings to promote classes: another was started in Leith.<sup>112</sup> Progress was still slow, however; the Leith class enrolled only 17 members,<sup>113</sup> and even in April 1918 the Edinburgh class could report an advance only 'in knowledge not numbers.'<sup>114</sup> The real advance seems to have come in 1919 and 1920, as the post-war ferment began. During 1919-1920, what had become the Edinburgh District of the Scottish Labour College enrolled 120 students in four classes; in 1920-1921 an initial October enrolment of 490 students in eighteen classes<sup>115</sup> rose over the succeeding months to 617,<sup>116</sup> 654,<sup>117</sup> and finally 'nearly 700' in 21 classes.<sup>118</sup> Sales of Plebs rose from eleven, to twenty and then thirty dozen monthly.<sup>119</sup>

We lack evidence in depth about the formation of the Communist Party in Edinburgh:<sup>120</sup> we know more of the overture than the first act. What there is, however, is consistent with the picture we have sketched. Fred Douglas recalled being drawn into the Party almost as a natural progression, having been involved in 'Hands Off Russia' agitation, in a Marxist economics class, and in distributing The Worker.<sup>121</sup> Bob Foulis, having led the Forty Hours strike and the left group within the ILP, moved into the Communist Party, perhaps through the Red Internation-

111. Ibid., September 1917.

112. Ibid., November 1917; the Organiser was James Stobie, a Railwayman whom we have encountered above.

113. Ibid., January 1918.

114. Ibid., April 1918.

115. Ibid., November 1920.

116. Ibid., December 1920.

117. Edinburgh district, Scottish Labour College, minutes 15 January 1921, quoted in Roberts, 'NCLC', 57.

118. Plebs, June 1921.

119. Ibid., December 1920, August 1921.

120. There are no surviving records of the Communist Party in Edinburgh before the Second World War; neither locally nor in London.

121. Douglas, 'Commotion', Evening Dispatch, 9, 10, 11 August 1955.



al of Labour Unions - of which he became Scottish organiser.<sup>122</sup> Arthur Woodburn, having led the Marxian School of Economics into its merger with the Labour College, joined the new Party.<sup>123</sup> The common theme was neither personal background nor agreement over strategy: rather it was that sense, by no means limited to the revolutionary left, that effective political (or industrial) action required effective organisation; and that this was best achieved through a single, centralised institution after a military model.

Walter Kendall has noted that, in the years before the formation of the Communist Party, in Britain

The marxist movement lacked an adequate organisational theory. Both in the unions and in the political field it proved capable of striking an important response yet in neither case did it have the means to turn the response to advantage. 124

Similarly the shop stewards allowed their critique of bureaucracy to obscure the fact that 'long term organisation is ... impossible without ... bureaucratic organisation'.<sup>125</sup> The war simultaneously exposed these inadequacies, demonstrated the advantages which the state possessed through effective organisation, and provided a working model in the organisation of the nation for the war effort. It also showed what workers could do, given adequate organisation, in the industrial field. In the immediate post-war years the revolutionary movement became acutely conscious of its organisational failings, especially in politics. Toward the end of the first year of peace, John S. Clarke expressed this view:

The capitalist class confronts its enemy with the up-to-date organisation of capitalist high finance - the worker

122. T&LC minutes, 23 August, 6 September 1921.

123. Millar, Labour College Movement, 186; Roberts, 'NCLC', 103. Woodburn's membership of the CP was only brief.

124. Kendall, 294.

125. Ibid.

feebly wields the out-worn weapons  
of a century ago. Against the tank,  
Howitzer, Lewis Gun, and aeroplane,  
the worker hurls himself, heroically  
armed with - a muzzle-loader of the  
days of Waterloo. Is it any wonder  
he is ignominiously defeated? 126

Or, as Gallacher and Campbell had it,

Old tactics and old methods of organ-  
isation have to be overhauled and  
brought up to date to enable us to  
meet and overcome the latest develop-  
ments of organisation from the  
employers' side. Delay spells  
disaster. Everywhere the organisation  
of the employers and their catspaw  
government is being improved to meet  
all eventualities. 127

Kendall is, therefore, correct to suggest that the formation of the Communist Party represented, above all, an organisational innovation among British revolutionaries; conversely it seems misleading to represent this as a function of Comintern manipulation.<sup>128</sup> There was, within the British labour movement, and among British Marxists, a strong sense of the need to reorganise, to unify; and the available models of organisation were hierarchical, often military. The Bolshevik experience was catalytic; it provided one unifying issue; and no doubt there was Comintern intervention in the restructuring of the British socialist movement. But, beyond doubt, the demand for reorganisation had arisen within the British movement in any case; and it seems likely that any such reorganisation would have drawn on the models which underlay the contemporaneous developments in Labour and trade union organisation.

126. John S. Clarke, 'Foreword' to W. Gallacher and J. R. Campbell, Direct Action. An Outline of Workshop and Social Organisation (Glasgow 1919; reprinted London 1972), 10-11.

127. Ibid., 32.

128. Cp Kendall, esp. 300.



## Chapter 10

### The Struggle for Labour Politics 1921 - 1927

#### 10.1 Introductory

The apparent unity which was achieved within the labour movement during those brief post-war years was founded on specific sets of understandings and beliefs: about the nature of politics, about political and industrial action, about their relationships and possibilities. These understandings and beliefs were grounded in the pre-war experience of the labour movement, but had in most cases been fundamentally modified by the impact of war: in addition, the war had given legitimacy to certain principles which had an overarching effect in the post-war reconstruction of the political organisation of labour. Essentially, these latter principles had pointed the way to more 'efficient' organisational structures: which meant hierarchical, centralised structures after the military model.

'Organisation' in this sense was attractive almost universally, for it appeared to provide the solution - or at least a part of the solution - to many of the problems which the movement confronted: and it appeared to do so despite varying definitions of the problems themselves. However, this 'unity' did not run deep. It could justify a need for better mechanisms, but it could not point to how these mechanisms should be used. Thus although, for instance, some of the motives which lay behind the formation of the Trades and Labour Council and of the Communist Party were the same, the former was not seen by Marxists as a substitute for the latter.

At the same time, unity was not only achieved in relation to organisational change: it was enhanced in the immediate post-war years by a number of factors. Firstly, during 1919, to an extent into

1920, industrial organisation could reasonably be seen as a major source of political power for the labour movement: it had shown great possibilities during 1910-1914 and during the war; its failings during 1919 (and earlier) could plausibly be ascribed to poor leadership (or organisation). In addition, although the 1918 Representation of the People Act had given Labour a means of constitutional advance, the General Election had been a disappointment. William Graham's victory was against the tide; Ramsay MacDonald, who lost his seat in the debacle, expressed a common view in Forward in January 1919:

this Parliament has no moral authority.  
When political organisation is crushed  
by fraud or force industrial organisation  
is the only defence that is left. 1

Opinion and author are both significant: many who, in normal circumstances, would have opposed strenuously any 'unconstitutional' action were prepared to contemplate it as a means to press a deceitful government back to responsibility. Industrial action, in short, might be used to redress the balance of the constitution.<sup>2</sup> In Edinburgh, certainly, this seems to have been a common view: Graham, for instance (who did not share it) was strongly attacked within the ILP for, among other reasons, stating that 'he was no believer in the "ca'canny" policy'. The first Labour MP in the city,

1. Forward, 11 January 1919, quoted Brown, 'Labour Party and Political Change,' 107.
2. This case is argued strongly by Brown, *ibid.*, 101-09; it is put less forcefully by Dowse, Left in the Centre, 60-65. Miliband's discussion, Parliamentary Socialism, 65-76, permits such an interpretation, though he does not argue it. Philip Snowden thought MacDonald's attitude in these years was a 'canvassing ... for support': his Forward articles 'played up to the Left Wing' (An Autobiography, Vol II, (London 1934), 574). But it is difficult to see MacDonald's writings and speeches of early 1919 as designed to enhance a parliamentary career which apparently had just ended; and, in any case, MacDonald's attitude is significant in part because he thought, clearly, that it would strike a chord.



within seven months of his election, survived a vote of no confidence from one of the branches which had nominated him by just 36 votes to 25: - and at a public meeting.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, as we have seen, the political differences within the labour movement in 1918-1921 were often within, as well as between, its various parties and organisations. This had two aspects. On the one hand, it discouraged the development of clear central principles within any organisation. Of course, the ILP and the Labour Party had always favoured very general statements of objective in any case; but the corollary of encouraging the widest possible recruitment might be<sup>a</sup> certain lack of commitment. During the later years of the war, the Scottish secretary of the Labour Party expressed concern about this:

It is a little aggravating to find so many organisations cropping up and appealing to our clientele and more or less overlapping ours. It cannot be helped meantime ... when challenged those persons point to the fact that the Labour Party has no programme. 4

But even after February 1918 the Labour Party's programme was a very general one, which allowed both Graham and John Maclean to be official Labour candidates in 1918. On the other hand, the structure of labour politics hindered attempts to impose any clear definition of its purpose or boundaries. The main organisational sources of power within the movement were the ILP (and to a lesser extent the other socialist parties), and the various trade unions: they had members who could spread the word, or they had money, or both. The Labour Party had neither: the growth of the apparatus of individual membership after 1918 was painfully slow;<sup>5</sup> and many of these members seem also to have been ILPers or Communists - their

3. ILP Edin. Central branch minutes, 9 June 1919: Walter McPhail, editor of the Evening News and an old friend, wrote to Graham in 1919: 'you are getting praised so much from the capitalist press .... [that] the rumour strongly prevails that you will be the Liberal candidate for Central Edinburgh at the next election. N.B. this is not a joke.' (Quoted Graham, Willie Graham, 93).
4. Ben Shaw to J.S. Middleton (Assistant Sec., LP), 3 April 1917, LP NEC correspondence, quoted Brown, 'Labour Party and Political Change,' 55.
5. See Appendix A.

membership a matter of convenience, and their prime loyalties elsewhere. The Labour Party's main source of power was its electoral role: it claimed the right to control the movement's interventions into elections, a claim which was generally acceded. But the electoral setback of 1918, followed by poor showings in municipal elections in 1920 and 1921 (Labour representation fell from six to two) meant that this was not a strong source in these early years. This is graphically illustrated by the inability of the Labour Party to prevent the Railwaymen from fielding, in 1921, its own municipal candidate in opposition to Labour - despite support from the national leadership of the Union, as well as the Party's.<sup>6</sup> When electoral politics did not convince as a route to power, the Labour Party's ability to control the disparate elements of the movement was small. Consequently, it was unable to assert effectively any definition of what Labour politics was. During the early post-war years, labour's political 'unity' was based, in large part, not on agreement, but on confusion about the nature of the disagreements, and on inability to enforce any particular version of the movement.

The years from 1920 can be seen as a period in which new allegiances, new coalitions, began to form within the labour movement. Some did not last; but by 1927 the politics of labour were - ideologically as well as in organisation - recognisably those which have persisted for half a century. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how these new coalitions were formed, and their character: one preliminary point must, however, be made. These coalitions were, first and foremost, based on common understandings of the political world: the strength of the working class; whether its strength was primarily 'industrial' or 'political'; what these terms meant; the possibilities of parliamentary action; and so forth. Only secondarily were they coalitions in the more common sense, of alliances formally arranged between recognisable political or social groups.

6. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 14, 28 August, 11 September, 9 October 20 November 1921; T&LC minutes, 31 August 1921.



In many cases, the construction of such a coalition depended as much on the recalculation of understandings to reduce the internal contradictions of individuals' or groups' political outlooks.

### 10.2 The failure of direct action, 1920

Although the early post-war years saw the coalescence of forms of unity which reorganised the political institutions of labour, they promised far more, at least to some. The main hope was that substantial advances could be achieved by 'direct action': for some, of course, this meant revolutionary change; but for others (such as MacDonald), the election had

created a Parliament that has none of the democratic safeguards of a Parliament - especially a well-equipped critical Opposition and a guarantee of full discussion and exposure. Therefore the Parliamentary Opposition must come from the outside. 7

Two examples of direct action in 1920 and 1921 in Edinburgh deserve examination.

The chief instance which has received historians' attention is the Council of Action campaign against British intervention in the Russo-Polish war in 1920: 'Labour's Fling', according to Miliband,<sup>8</sup> and no doubt one of those times which, for David Coates, demonstrate that the working class will on occasion respond 'to very radical political leadership indeed.'<sup>9</sup> We have already touched on this:<sup>10</sup> the Labour Party was able - for the first and last time - to initiate substantial 'extra-parliamentary' action. The reasons are several.

7. J.R.MacDonald in Labour Leader, 2 January 1919, quoted in P.R.Thomas, 'The Attitude of the Labour Party to Reform of Parliament, with particular reference to the House of Commons, 1919-1951', (Ph.D thesis, University of Keele, 1974), 27.
8. Miliband, 76-82.
9. Coates, Labour Party and Struggle for Socialism, viii.
10. See chapter 8.

The leadership of the Party was itself in large part outside the Commons, and, as we have seen, prepared to countenance such methods: at least, it found it more difficult to oppose them. Elections were still distant, and the parliamentary Party relatively weak, particularly within the movement. The 'Hands Off Russia' committees had been forcing the pace around the country: the movement was prepared. But, above all, the issue of defence of the Revolution was inextricably associated with defence of the Russians' right to choose their own form of government (which had, of course, been one of the main public reasons for labour support for the Great War), and with opposition to further war and conscription.<sup>11</sup> It was, therefore, in one sense a particularly straightforward issue on which to mobilise for direct action: it was also one on which the objective of the action was clear, and the method appropriate.

Edinburgh played its part in the Council of Action campaign. But the latter's impact was not so unambiguous as we might expect, at least in Edinburgh. For at precisely the same time, the city's labour movement was embarked on another exercise in direct action: one which occupied its main institutions for much longer, yet which was destined to fail. This was the Scottish rent strike of 1920; it bears further examination, for it deeply influenced the perceptions of what direct action could achieve, at least for the 'mainstream' of the labour movement.

Housing, as earlier chapters have shown, had long been an important issue for labour.<sup>12</sup> The war, however, brought major changes. The most important were, firstly, the severe pressure on accommodation leading to rent rises;<sup>13</sup> secondly, the rent strikes,

11. See S.White, 'Labour's Council of Action', esp. 112-16.

12. Cp J.Butt, 'Working class housing in Glasgow, 1851 - 1914', 57-92; Butt, 'Working Class housing in Glasgow, 1900-39' in I.MacDougall (ed.), Essays in Scottish Labour History (Edinburgh n.d. [1978?]), 143-69; Gray, Labour Aristocracy, esp. 91-120, 128, 182.

13. See esp. s. 4.6 above.



especially that on the Clyde, which forced the rent restriction legislation, and led incidentally to the formation of the Scottish Labour Housing Association;<sup>14</sup> and, thirdly, the publication of the Report, in 1917, of the Royal Commission on working-class housing in Scotland.<sup>15</sup> Together these shewed that successful action on housing was possible, and lent strength to those who argued for drastic action. Initially, after the war, the Government seemed ready to move: the provision by the state of 'habitations fit for the heroes who have won the war',<sup>16</sup> which would be of superior design and in much larger numbers, was promised by the 1919 Housing Act.<sup>17</sup> By late 1920, of course, the Government had begun to downgrade this commitment, as the Treasury won the battle for 'economy', and the threat of revolution receded.<sup>18</sup> But in Edinburgh the Town Council did not share the Government's apprehensions, it seems, even in 1919; or perhaps other fears seemed more immediate. Even in 1925

14. On the Clyde rent strike, see McHugh, 'Clyde Rent Strike', 56-62; Melling, 'Glasgow Rent Strike', 39-44; B.Horne, '1915 The Great Rents Victory', Scottish Marxist 2, 1972, 19-26; S.Damer, 'State, Class and Housing: Glasgow 1885 - 1919', esp. 91-106, and Melling, 'Clydeside Housing', esp. 147-151, both in Melling (ed.), Housing, Social Policy and the State. The last, 151, and McHugh, 61, mention the origins of the SLHA - though both refer to it incorrectly as the Scottish Labour Party Housing Association. Other accounts of the rent strike are to be found in Hinton, First Shop Stewards' Movement, 125-7; Gallacher, Revolt on the Clyde, 54-5; A. and V. Flynn, 'We shall not be removed', in L.Flynn (ed.) We Shall be All (London 1978), 18-33; Kendall, 115; Moorhouse, Wilson, Chamberlain, 'Rent Strikes', esp. 135-6, 151-3.
15. Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland, Rural and Urban, Cd. 8731 (1917).
16. Lloyd George in The Times, 13 November 1918: quoted in B.B.Gilbert, British Social Policy 1914-1939 (London 1970), 19.
17. M.Swenarton, '"Insurance against Revolution"', 87-9.
18. Ibid., 95-8.

the majority of councillors were property-owners; they dominated the key council committees: they made up 69 per cent, for instance, of the Housing and Town Planning Committee.<sup>19</sup> And after the war, the housing issue,

directly affected property and building interests. Landlords were threatened by an increase in the supply of modern council houses and local builders by plans to use direct labour to build them. 20

Whatever the reason (and the council's language was that of community, rather than personal, interest),<sup>21</sup> the Town Council's record in house-building fell well-short of labour demands in the early post-war years:

For six months, demobilised men and civilians have been clamouring for employment, but not a stone or brick has been laid in Edinburgh. The public were assured that schemes were ready; that, as soon as labour could be found, the work would be tackled. The Town Council now blame the Local Government Board [which]... denies responsibility, 22

the Trades Council reported in 1919. Eventually building began, on various schemes, but they 'proceed[ed] at a painfully slow pace,' although the need became 'daily ... more clamant'.<sup>23</sup> Throughout our period, this refrain continued.

In the summer of 1919, a rent strike occurred in Rosyth, which, as we have seen, had close links with Edinburgh. The two accounts of the number of householders involved differ: 700, and 1500 to 1600 out of 1602 houses. But in either case it was substantial: and despite legal action against fourteen strikers,

thanks to the amazing solidarity on the part of the workers' wives in withholding the rents for over six weeks, they were

19. Elliott, McCrone and Skelton, 'Property and Politics', tables 1 and 2. 'Property' here excludes own place of residence.

20. Ibid., 19.

21. The main argument was the need for 'politics' and 'government departments' to be kept out of municipal administration: see the useful discussion in *ibid.*, 16-20.

22. TC AR 1919, 14,

23. TC AR 1920, 5.



successful in compelling the  
Government to have their claims  
fully investigated .... 24

This set the labour movement in Edinburgh thinking: the Trades Council, for instance, commended 'a novel method of dealing with the Rent Question'; 'a precedent which will not readily be lost sight of by the working class of Edinburgh'.<sup>25</sup> The strike reached its successful conclusion in August 1919; in October the Trades Council convened a conference on housing,<sup>26</sup> and in December it agreed to call a public meeting to establish a Tenant's Defence League.<sup>27</sup> This was 'manned and officered by men of legal training,' and was to 'keep a jealous eye on the rights of its members': within three months it had a membership of 'quite respectable proportions'.<sup>28</sup>

This was an institutional mechanism designed to associate the labour movement with the interests of tenants. It was probably also intended to mobilise: the main activity of earlier 'Tenants' Defence Leagues', notably in Glasgow and Rosyth, had been just the prosecution of rent strikes. There had, then, been over six months' local preparation when, in May 1920, the Scottish Labour Housing Association summoned a conference in Glasgow, to consider what action should be taken against the prospect of rent increases under the 1920 Rent Act.<sup>29</sup> There was a strong difference of opinion, certainly among Edinburgh labour, as to what the action should be. The Trades Council's delegates' report was rejected by 33 votes to 10 when it became clear that they had supported a rent strike if rents were increased.<sup>30</sup> A Railwaymen's delegate, a strong revolutionary syndicalist referred in particular to the suggestion that the rent strike should be associated with a stoppage of work. He thought 'the proposed 24 hours strike discussion had been rushed'; he was not opposed to

24. TC AR 1920, 5; this account also draws on TC minutes, 27 July 1919.

25. TC AR 1920, 5.

26. TC minutes, 26 October 1919.

27. Ibid., 2 December 1919.

28. TC AR 1920, 5.

29. The Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (Restrictions) Act 1920 allowed a rent rise of 15 per cent.

30. T&LC minutes, 1 June 1920.

industrial action for political ends, but to the entire objective:

He thought it was a waste of time.  
The real issue is not restrict rents  
but to get houses damn the high rents,  
get this in your wages. 31

So in Edinburgh there were serious doubts about whether a rent strike, and associated industrial action, could succeed - perhaps also, in some quarters, about the rent strike as a tactic. Perhaps this view was shared elsewhere: the SLHA felt it necessary to summon another Conference; the STUC issued a circular calling on its affiliates to attend and support the call for a 24 hour stoppage of work.<sup>32</sup> Under this pressure the Trades Council's Executive met with eight members of the Tenants' Defence League: their view was that a rent strike alone was unlikely to succeed, and that it should be associated with a stoppage of work which was more than symbolic. Recommended to support either 'no strike' or a 'complete strike', the Council instructed its delegates to argue for a complete strike until the 1920 Act was withdrawn.<sup>33</sup> The Railwaymen, still reluctant to act on rents, nonetheless agreed to send delegates to Glasgow

on ground that workers must be up and doing. If Glasgow workers resisted paying rents we cannot stand by without giving them help. 34

At the Conference, attended by '14 or 15 hundred delegates from all over Scotland,'<sup>35</sup> the Trades Council's motions were ruled out of order,<sup>36</sup> and it became effectively committed to the resolutions agreed: a 24 hour stoppage of work on 23 August in opposition to the Government's allowing rent rises; a refusal to pay the increases proposed by the new Act; and the organisation of meetings and demonstrations in support of these.<sup>37</sup>

31. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 20 June 1920.

32. Circulars from SLHA (June 1920) and STUC (15 July 1920) cited in I. MacDougall (ed.), A Catalogue of Some Labour Records in Scotland and some Scots records outside Scotland (Edinburgh 1978), 157, 214.

33. T&LC minutes, 18, 27 July 1920.

34. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 18 July 1920.

35. Ibid., 4 August 1920.

36. T&LC minutes, 3 August 1920.

37. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 4 August 1920.



The misgivings expressed in Edinburgh were to prove well founded. Substantial preparation took place: a manifesto, and a covenant to be signed by tenants refusing to pay, were drawn up: a public meeting was called in the Meadows to demand 'No Increase in Rents'.<sup>38</sup> The Trades Council's Secretary, Alexander Smith, was exceptionally paid a salary to work full-time as organiser of the campaign: he opened a 'central bureau' at the Council's rooms in Bristo Port.<sup>39</sup> Yet although the one-day stoppage of work was judged a success (according to Forward, 10,000 attended the demonstration that Monday),<sup>40</sup> by 31 August the Council's Executive virtually admitted defeat: only about 15 per cent of tenants were withholding payment, and 'owing to the number of people paying rent they recommended that tenants should not resist eviction ...'.<sup>41</sup> Attempts were made to resuscitate the action: a conference of union officials was summoned, advertisements were placed in the press for financial support, an effort made 'to organise for November'. But all to no avail: by late October the Rent Strike Committee was £80 in the red, and in early December it was wound up.<sup>42</sup>

This set-back, whilst coinciding with the apparent achievement of the 'Hands Off Russia' action, had a far more profound impact on the political thinking of labour in Edinburgh. It provided evidence of the fragility of the labour movement: its image as an army, a machine, organised for the struggle, crumbled before a different reality. The 'unity' which could produce institutional change was not strong enough to achieve a successful mobilisation in 'direct action'. A number of institutions within the movement (from the Parliamentary Labour Party to local union branches) opposed the rent strike. A number of union branches doubted their ability to mobilise even for a 24 hour strike on the issue; two rejected the Trades Council's proposals outright.<sup>43</sup> But perhaps more telling, of the organisations

38. T&LC minutes, 3,6, 10 August 1920: the meeting, to be held on 7 August, was cancelled when the Council of Action campaign against war with Russia intervened.

39. Ibid., 15, 27 August 1920.

40. Forward, 28 August 1920, cited Brown 'Labour Party', 140-41.

41. T&LC minutes, 31 August 1920.

42. Ibid., 31 August, 12 September, 24 October, 5 December 1920.

43. Ibid., 10 August 1920.

represented at the Edinburgh conference, which had given instructions to proceed with the rent strike, no less than 32 had not contributed financially over two months - the two critical months - later.<sup>44</sup> In short, the action failed not because the forces of the landlords, or<sup>of</sup> the state, had proved too powerful in open conflict: the labour movement had simply proved unable to bring its battalions on to the field.

There were, roughly, two ways of responding to this situation, not mutually exclusive. The first takes us back to the discussion of the last chapter: it could reinforce the notion that the major failing of the movement lay in the area of organisation and co-ordination. But the more important response was to question the appropriateness of the strategy, or at least of the tactics. Of course, the various currents in the movement developed different criticisms of the strategy. For some syndicalists, for instance, the rent strike was 'dragging the workers into a mess'; the answer was to 'ask the working class to organise themselves to abolish the cause of rising rents and all their other problems - the capitalist system.'<sup>45</sup> For others on the left, although the 'only thing to cause the oppressors to think was to stop the wheels of industry', the rent strike should be supported because it was necessary to act 'on the ground of the class struggle as we found it, this on the ground of historic development.'<sup>46</sup>

For one important element of the movement, however, the lessons of the rent agitation were lessons about direct action, and about the possibilities of any industrial action. This interpretation also drew on recent industrial experience, and a sense that

with overwhelming numbers of unemployed, with Capital armed with large reserve funds and replete with carefully prepared machinery, the power of the strike can only be effective to an uncertain degree ....<sup>47</sup>

44. Ibid., 24 October 1920. We do not know how many organisations attended the conference on 14 August, but 95 organisations were affiliated to the TC in 1920-21.

45. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 4 August 1920.

46. Ibid.

47. T&LC AR 1921, 2.



It was therefore necessary to find an alternative strategy to cope with the new situation. This was presented as a 'return to political effort':<sup>48</sup> that is, a concentration on the development of local Labour Parties 'to carry out the necessary Parliamentary and Municipal propaganda',<sup>49</sup> and a shift away from direct action - now characterised as 'revolutionary industrial methods.'<sup>50</sup>

The failure of direct action, and the erosion of union strength, placed intolerable strains on the post-war labour coalition. This, of course, had not been deeply-rooted, but had rested on two main elements. The first was the strength of notions of organisation and efficiency, which provided the basis for the restructuring of the movement's political institutions. In essence, this remained unchallenged. The second was the commonality over method which, temporarily and over a limited range of issues, had seen labour politicians prepared to take 'direct action'. Many factors were required for this, but perhaps the most basic was a belief that the methods of 'direct action' worked. During 1920 this belief was knocked away; not, indeed, for the entire spectrum of labour thought, but for a crucial segment. From late 1920, therefore, we can view labour politics as grouping around two new positions; we now turn to an examination of this new situation.

### 10.3 Labour socialism, Marxism, and their coalitions

In an important work, Stuart Macintyre has proposed that labour politics in the 1920s can be understood in terms of 'the opposition of two doctrines, Marxism and Labour Socialism'. The latter was 'the political perspective of the Labour activists of the period,

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 5.

50. Ibid., 2.

along with the more general understanding of the social and economic processes which supported this perspective':<sup>51</sup> it was most clearly articulated by men such as MacDonald and Philip Snowden:

The purpose of Labour Socialism ... was to lift the working class up from its lowly pre-occupation with wages and conditions, and to endow it with a sense of social purpose. This involved the articulation of an elaborate theoretical edifice: a historical perspective of social progress in the nineteenth century positivist tradition; an economic analysis to show that the worker was denied the full fruits of his labour; an organic view of society to indicate how this injustice ought to be corrected. 52

This doctrine implied considerable scepticism about strikes, which threatened the concept of an organic society; it also involved great confidence in the power of moral appeal, and of education. Now, as we have seen, in the immediate aftermath of war, this doctrine was weak: MacDonald, ejected from Parliament, found a justification for 'direct action'; William Graham, recently returned, was more ambivalent. Graham was probably the most prominent of Edinburgh's Labour Socialists: yet even he felt a need, in those early post-war years, to go some way to meet the 'direct actionists'. Certainly he expressed doubts about the House of Commons, whose 'whole atmosphere ... was almost fatal to men who were in earnest.... Hardly any measure within recent times had gone to the roots of the social and economic wrong.'<sup>53</sup> And at the same time he extended a hand to the 'direct actionists'; essentially inviting them to enter the Labour Socialist fold:

The most ardent advocate of direct action would not dispute that it was wrong to concentrate on industrial

51. Macintyre, A Proletarian Science, 47.

52. Ibid., 55.

53. Graham, 100.



issues. After all their discussion they had always to come back to general well-being, to a real community of effort, in which sectional demands were subordinated to public progress, and to such a combination of activity in the industrial field and in politics as would achieve the proper relationship of industry to the State and the State to industry ... . 54

As the post-war boom passed, however, the self-confidence of Labour Socialism increased. Direct action no longer seemed capable of providing solutions; the Labour Socialist commitment to progress through moral appeal was no longer threatened. Thus we find Graham attacking 'the "Left Wing" [and] ... the harm they were doing to the Labour Party'<sup>55</sup> at a Trades and Labour Council meeting; and the Council's Executive regretting that

The easily seen benefits and quick returns of war and post-war trade union activity gave an undue prominence to the possibilities of revolutionary industrial methods, -and created an attractive school of thought, which found expression in the growth of some revolutionary bodies and the creation of others. 56

It was a 'lamentable fact that these organisations attracted undesirable elements,'<sup>57</sup> and

the ebullient propaganda of the [se] bodies which dub themselves revolutionary have entirely failed to attract any substantial support from the workers generally. 58

This 'fact' was itself comforting, for it seemed to underline the Labour Socialists' belief that 'revolutionary heroics do not readily accord with the temperament of the men and women who make up the great body of our people,'<sup>59</sup> and that 'the development of the local Labour

54. Ibid.

55. T&LC minutes, 29 May 1920.

56. T&LC AR 1921, 2.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 5.

Parties ... to carry out the necessary Parliamentary and Municipal propaganda ... will put a power into our hands that cannot be denied'.<sup>60</sup>

In practice, of course, Labour Socialism was important as the central, justifying, doctrine of an important section of labour. The adherents of the doctrine - men and women in the mould of William Graham - were as nothing unless they could construct effective coalitions with other elements of the movement. (In 1919 and early 1920 this had been impossible: indeed, the Labour Socialists' isolation had been such as to induce confusion among some of its leading exponents.) These coalitions could not, however, require the wholesale acceptance of the Labour Socialist doctrine: rather, they were built around certain central notions. In some cases these were fragments of Labour Socialist doctrine; in others, they were (so to say) the outcome of 'negotiations' between Labour Socialism and the guiding assumptions of other groupings. These notions were the principles which legitimised common action by these various groupings; the coalition existed only in relation to the actions that it took.

The constituent elements of the coalition were not static, and much of the discussion that follows is concerned with the processes whereby its size and cohesion ebbed and flowed. Nevertheless, it is possible to look at the main principles on which it was grounded. Two stand out. First, political and industrial action were perceived as distinct; in particular, the latter could not be used legitimately in pursuit of the former. This distinction formed the basis of the alliance between Labour Socialism and the more economistic, 'labourist', views of many prominent trade unionists.<sup>61</sup> For while Labour Socialism was essentially unsympathetic to industrial action, labourism often involved an acceptance that militant industrial action was necessary in the pursuit of a 'fair day's pay'. The resolution lay in the ability of Labour Socialism and labourism to agree that, at least, industrial action should be confined to a

60. Ibid.

61. 'Labourism' here is used in the sense defined by Saville, 'The ideology of Labourism', 213-26.



collective bargaining role. This was, of course, a notion which was enshrined in law: unions' entitlement to take industrial action 'in contemplation or furtherance of a trade dispute' had been hard won and not easily maintained; ardent defence of this position no doubt enhanced still further the status lent to it by statute.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, this formulation allowed the Labour Socialists to justify their apparent sympathy with some of the 'direct action' of 1919 and 1920: retrospectively, it could be redefined as industrial action, pure and simple.

Second, political action was constitutional action: fighting parliamentary and municipal elections, and propaganda and organisation to this end. This was not, in itself, a meeting-point with other sections of the movement; but there was a widespread agreement that this was a fundamental form of politics even among those (many, for instance, in the ILP) who did not agree that it defined the boundaries of politics. Thus it enabled Labour Socialism to adopt a clear strategy which could be pursued at all times, and which (at almost all times) could be pursued in co-operation with the Labour left.

We have suggested that Labour Socialism was a doctrine whose main opposition was Marxism. Between the two, however, there were at least three political trends which provided the motivation for significant numbers within the labour movement. Two, labourism and the ILP left, we have already touched on; a third was syndicalism. These were the main trends whose support the Labour Socialists could seek;<sup>63</sup> by the same token they were also objects of Marxist blandishment. Again we must bear in mind that these trends were not constant in size: their strength waxed and waned in relation to many factors - not least, as we have seen, their successes. Thus the objective, though not always consciously or clearly stated, of Labour Socialists and Marxists was not merely to mobilise these

62. See Wedderburn, Worker and the Law, 305-27; J.Saville, 'Trade Unions and Free Labour: the Background to the Taff Vale Decision' in A.Briggs and J. Saville, Essays in Labour History (London 1967) 317-50.

63. Cp Macintyre, A Proletarian Science, 60-65.

trends in common action, but to shift individuals' outlooks nearer to their own. But since this particular objective was achieved only to a limited degree, what we may term the Labour Socialist and Marxist coalitions<sup>64</sup> were inherently unstable. They were achieved around a limited range of issues, and on the basis of certain sets of legitimising principles; when the issues (or the way they were perceived) changed, the alignments might shift.

#### 10.4 The Labour Socialist coalition and labourism

The foundation of the eventual success of Labour Socialism was its ability to form working relationships with trade union labourism and with the Labour left, largely grouped in the ILP. In this section we examine how the first of these was achieved.

When the possibilities of direct action began to seem more remote, perhaps from the summer of 1920, Labour Socialism began to assert itself. At this stage there was no clear appreciation of future allies and adversaries. To be sure, in a paper probably written in 1921, Graham appealed to the trade unions to 'determine their attitude to political action', claiming that

The extravagancies of some of the left-wing theorists of recent years have been costly to the trade union movement and they have in part contributed to present chaos. <sup>65</sup>

At the same time, he claimed to note a 'healthy reaction in favour of reliance on the ballot box.'<sup>66</sup> But whilst the ideas of direct action

64. These terms ('Labour Socialist coalition' and 'Marxist coalition') thus imply only that Labour Socialists and Marxists formed their core; not that all members of the coalition were, or became, Labour Socialists or Marxists.

65. W.Graham, 'Effective Trade Unionism' (typescript, n.d. [c.1921]).

66. Ibid.



might be wrongheaded, there was in 1920 and 1921 an attempt to win over the people who held them. Many of their contributions and achievements were praised. The revolutionary bodies, for instance,

have undoubtedly generated sincere enthusiasms, and, of more importance, they have created a healthy movement for economic study, untrammelled by the accepted nostrums of orthodox defenders of the system of big and easy profits. 67

Apparently, it was felt that some of the institutions created in this period were now established parts of the labour body politic, which might in time be converted. Thus the Trades and Labour Council's Executive in 1921:

The Scottish Labour College, and like institutions, have sprung into permanent being, and when they emerge from the inevitable limitations of immature experience, they will undoubtedly contribute greatly to the real progress of Labour. 68

Labour Socialism needed, not indeed the ideas, but the effort, of syndicalism's erstwhile or temporary adherents. The 'ebullient propaganda of the bodies which dub themselves revolutionary,' and their

Enthusiasm, ability and genuine effort have undoubtedly attracted a goodly number of keen workers who would normally have been useful units in the great work of the Labour Movement. 69

The Labour Socialist endeavour was an ambitious one: it needed this enthusiasm and effort, but demanded that it be directed toward the electoral strategy.

During 1921, as we have seen, the hopes of syndicalism were dashed as the Triple Alliance fell apart. The syndicalists themselves were increasingly isolated: a railwayman, for instance, who attacked

67. T&LC AR 1921, 2.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

his union's election manifesto as 'not ... in line with revolutionary socialism' found himself in a small minority.<sup>70</sup> This had two important implications. On the one hand, direct action waned in importance as a political tendency: in particular, it lost the strategic direction which an ascendant and self-confident syndicalism had been able to provide. For Labour Socialism, therefore, syndicalism became a less important competitor. On the other hand, it became more easy for the Labour Socialists to establish links with those who, for several years previously, had advocated the tactics of direct action. In short, syndicalism was less of a threat and its former supporters more open to attempts to win them into alliances on other bases.

Trade union support was essential if the Labour Socialist strategy was to succeed. Union membership was the only substantial and reliable source of income for the Labour Party, particularly during the early years when membership and electoral success might prove elusive. This became especially clear after the debacle at the 1919 municipal election: for the ILP's contribution to the Election Fund in that year (£55 8s 9d ) slumped to £2 7s 2½d in 1920, whilst union contributions (which had been larger anyway) fell just £7 3s 6d to £61.6s.<sup>71</sup> The ILP's achievement in 1919 had been based on the efforts of individual collectors:<sup>72</sup> this method was clearly more sensitive to moods of success and failure than one which depended on the institutional decisions of union organisations. Yet electoral success was expensive. In 1919, for instance, £223 18s 10d had been spent on elections in Edinburgh alone; but all six Town Council candidates were defeated, and only two Parish Council candidates were victorious.<sup>73</sup> The rate of return was poor; other indications from this first post-war contest were equally inauspicious. The defeats were, at least in part, due to

70. NUR No.1 branch minutes, 9 October 1921: the vote was 42 to 11. The manifesto is reproduced in Appendix B.

71. See Appendix A.

72. TC AR 1920, 24-5, lists 28 individual ILP collectors; far more than in any subsequent year in our period.

73. Another three were returned unopposed: TC AR 1920, 18; The Scotsman, 5 November 1919.



'a new coalition, a combination of all sections of Liberals and Unionists against collectivism in municipal affairs', The Scotsman reported:

the electors did not ask the politics of the candidates who stood against the Labourists; in several cases it was, indeed, not known to which party a non-Socialist candidate belonged. It was enough for the average citizen to be appraised of the man who represented the Labour ticket. That knowledge determined his choice; and by agreement between the non-Socialist parties the door of Edinburgh Town Council has been closed against preachers of the street corner gospel of extremism. 74

If Labour was to be thus opposed, the road to electoral victory might be long, arduous, and expensive.

The onset of the depression broke the liaison - always unstable and tenuous - between syndicalism and labourism. The apostles of direct action had been of some value when industrial action seemed a viable union strategy: they had various organisational and tactical skills, and their activism was dedicated to trade union (rather than 'political') organisation. But even in 1920 the liaison had been limited to a relatively narrow range of issues. When, for instance, an active Railwaymen's departmental representative applied for promotion to inspector,<sup>75</sup> some argued from a syndicalist position against 'active members taking official positions':

It being a mere impossibility for a member to fight on both sides. Too often it meant that such members 'emancipated' themselves and not the workers. 76

But they were isolated, unable to overcome the labourist assumption that a good man could exercise managerial tasks in the interests of the workers. From 1921 the areas on which syndicalism and labourism

74. The Scotsman, 6 November 1919.

75. 'Departmental representative' was a union post; 'inspectors' were junior managerial grades.

76. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 20 May 1920: the vote was 31 to 2, but the argument was interwoven with claims that the representative concerned was being accused of 'belly crawling' and being a 'traitor to the NUR'.

could find common ground diminished further, leaving room for the Labour Socialists' advances. In a conscious re-evaluation of strategy in 1921, the Trades and Labour Council's Executive implicitly criticised post-war union policies. 'The Strike is one of the most important rights which we possess, and your Executive would be the last authority to suggest that the Strike weapon must be abandoned or relaxed.' But

while it is a weapon, it is only a weapon. It cannot become a policy and only foolhardy men, regardless of consequences, can be blind to its limitations. 77

Here was labourism distancing itself from syndicalism and direct action.

Labourism, however, was never a coherent and consistent political standpoint, as Marxism and Labour Socialism were (or as syndicalism aspired to be). It had no theorists: it was, rather, an amorphous amalgam of attitudes and policies, with a more or less specific relationship to collective bargaining. Although this lent it great flexibility, it was also a limitation. For while syndicalism and the theorists of direct action might have been peddling a 'foolhardy' strategy, it was at least a strategy. This was where Labour Socialism found a role. The war and its aftermath had demonstrated that

whatever our trade ...., while Governmental power is in the hands of Capital interests, the strength of the State stands armed against the worker. 78

Labour Socialism promised that this power could be won by electoral means: it proposed a strategy in which the unions had a vital role, but not one which would jeopardise their industrial position. It did not suggest, unlike syndicalism or Marxism, that industrial action could further political ends. Rather, it allowed the unions to retain

77. T&LC AR 1921, 6.

78. Ibid.



flexible, empirical, industrial attitudes: 'a positive industrial policy includes much more than the use of the Strike in every emergency', but it 'should be supplemented by vigorous and sustained work by Labour in the political field.'<sup>79</sup>

In essence then, Labour Socialism and labourism could marry because each accepted a division between 'political' and 'industrial' issues; and because the latter were acknowledged to be the preserve of trade unions. Their relationship was not always an easy one. The labourists' economism (perhaps most explicitly expressed when the Plasterers condemned the Town Council's 'stopping the work on Housing Schemes in the City' not because of the resulting shortage of accommodation but because it was 'preventing a worker from selling his Labour in the Highest Market')<sup>80</sup> lay uneasily with Labour Socialist notions of social unity and harmony. And when economism became militant, or when employers took the offensive, the axis of labourism could shift again to a point where the direct action of syndicalism or - increasingly - Communism began to seem relevant. But the liaison was underpinned by the growth of the Labour Party's apparatus. This enabled Labour Socialism to promote a definition of politics which severely restricted the left, and provided a structure which sought to separate political from industrial action, and thus supported labourist views of trade unions' role. Let us look at how this liaison developed.

The assumption of those who had formed the Trades and Labour Council was, as we have seen, that it would be an organisation which could be turned to whatever end its members and affiliates might desire. During our period it did indeed serve as a 'council of action', as well as directing the local Labour Party apparatus. But the Council should not be looked at in isolation: these two roles, which typify the syndicalist (or Communist) and Labour Socialist strategies respectively, made structural demands of the entire local

79. Ibid.

80. T&LC minutes, 8 August 1922.

labour and trade union movement. We shall suggest that these roles were incompatible.

Before the Trades and Labour Council was formed, local Labour organisation in the city was haphazard: ward committees varied in strength, but were concentrated in some - by no means all - of the working class wards. Probably they existed sporadically, being formed on a more or less ad hoc basis when an election was imminent, and fading away thereafter: they had, after all, no other function.<sup>81</sup> By 1920, when the amalgamation took place, there was 'the nucleus of three Divisional Labour Parties in the city - Central, West and North':<sup>82</sup> a formulation which suggests there was little more than a nucleus.<sup>83</sup> The Labour Party, therefore, had much to gain from its organisational fusion with the trade unions, but little to offer save hope for the future: 'The remedy is obviously not to petition, but to control'.<sup>84</sup> Save financially, however, gains did not automatically accrue; in 1920 and 1921 the trade union delegates (who were a substantial majority of the new Council)<sup>85</sup> showed little

81. E.g., a 'strong committee' was formed in George Square ward in late 1917; a committee was formed in Dalry Ward in mid-1918. But Dalry, at least, had been fought successfully by Labour on several occasions before the war. (Edin.LP minutes, 22 November 1917, 13 June 1918; Fox, 'Labour Town Councillors', 1-2). Only two ward committees, Gorgie and St.Leonard's, paid dues to the Edin.LP in 1917/18 (AR, 8).
82. Edin LP AR 1919/20 in T&LC AR 1920, 18. This excludes Leith, of course, which had a separate burgh LP: see Rules of the Leith United Trades Council and Labour Party (Leith, 1918).
83. Only four ward committees paid dues to the Edin. LP in 1919/20: George Square, St. Leonard's and St.Giles' (which were in Central Division), and Gorgie (West Division); a Dalry committee (West Division) is recorded as existing, but paid no dues; and a West Division Women's Section also existed. Edin LP AR 1919/20 in T&LC AR 1920, 22.
84. T&LC AR 1922, 8.
85. In 1920/1921 there were 32 delegates from political bodies, 282 from trade union branches (T&LC AR 1921, 21-6). There was, of course, no restriction in our period of voting on political issues to those trade union delegates who had paid 'political contributions'.



sign of concern for their new charge. This is perhaps most clearly shown by the Council's unwillingness to postpone or rearrange its regular fortnightly meeting which fell on election day in 1920.<sup>86</sup> Apart from agreeing election addresses and selecting candidates,<sup>87</sup> Party organisation was not discussed until June 1921.

So for the first eighteen months, or thereabouts, of the new Council's existence, the Labour Party had handed over its government in Edinburgh to trade union delegates - amongst whose notions of political activity the electoral strategy of the Labour Party did not loom large. During the latter part of 1921, however, this began to change. As we have seen, the dominance of 'direct action' as a political strategy was eroded. Within the Edinburgh labour movement a loose Labour Socialist grouping, which centred on the local branch of the Social Democratic Federation, began to take advantage of this. A substantial number of SDF members held important positions in the local movement, and especially in the Trades and Labour Council;<sup>88</sup> they seem to have realised that the

86. T&LC minutes 19 October 1920; the meeting in question was that held on 2 November 1920.

87. T&LC minutes 18 May, 18 August (EC), 14, 15 September (both EC), 12 October 1920 (EC).

88. The following can be firmly identified as SDF members who were also T&LC officers or executive committee members: T.A.Cairns (T&LC Treasurer 1922-4, President 1925, EC 1926-9); W.Elger (T&LC EC 1920, President 1921-2; Sec. STUC, 1922-46); A.Eunson, (TC President 1916-18); G.Hogg (Leith UTC & LP President, 1920; T&LC Vice-President 1921, President 1922-4; EC 1925-7); R.Martin (T&LC Librarian, 1921); T.E.McDonald (T&LC EC 1921-22); R.McKenzie (T&LC Librarian 1920); J.J.Pottinger (TC Assistant Sec., 1918); F.Smithies (T&LC Librarian 1922, Political Officer, 1923-30); G.Williamson (Treasurer, T&LC, 1920-22). Other prominent SDF members were: T.Drummond Shiels (Councillor 1919-20, MP for East Edinburgh 1924-31); A.Young (Councillor 1922-24, 1926-32; MP for Glasgow Partick 1923-24) J.A.Young (Councillor, 1909-20).

Labour Party apparatus could be used to develop a strong, constitutional, political bloc within the movement. So it was William Elger, the Council's President and a member of the local SDF Executive Committee, who in June 1921 set in train the organisation of the Party machine. A meeting of the Council's Executive heard reports from divisional Labour Parties: Elger stressed the need for 'perfecting machinery', and insisted on statements of the 'actual position' of membership and finance from each. Each local party was then instructed to meet within three weeks, and a special sub-committee of Council Executive and DLP representatives would meet monthly.<sup>89</sup> Over the following months this detailed work was started: questions of finance, propaganda, literature, registration of voters, were tackled. Previously, it seems, the Party had not even had copies of the voters' roll.<sup>90</sup> Then, when the 1921 municipal elections were over, a system of central funding to DLPs was agreed.<sup>91</sup>

All this could be achieved for three main reasons. Firstly, the pressure from national and Scottish Labour Parties was backed by politically and organisationally able local supporters. Secondly, direct action was beginning to seem less and less plausible as a political strategy. And, thirdly, the direct action coalition had never, in any event, defined political action to the exclusion of electoral methods: it had simply won a commitment to its own. In addition, it had developed no institutions which could impose, and 'police', such definitions. So there was no basis for the emergence of opposition to the Labour Socialist proposals. The strength of the Labour Socialist strategy, then, was its ability to mobilise widely held principles - essentially, those based around notions of organisation, which were non-contentious - to promote a form of political organisation; a form, moreover, which promoted a particular type of political

89. T&LC minutes, 1 June 1921 (EC).

90. Ibid., 5, 6 July, 2 August 1921.

91. Ibid., 9, 22 November 1921.



activity. Although Labour politics was not narrow, encompassing right and left trends, it did increasingly define the strategy (as electoral) within which these trends could operate.

A critical decision was made in April 1922: the Trades and Labour Council appointed a Political Officer,<sup>92</sup> to 'be responsible for those duties appertaining to the activities of Local Labour Parties.'<sup>93</sup> This allowed the Labour Party apparatus to develop with greater independence from the vicissitudes of the Council: the trade union delegates had, in effect, granted a measure of autonomy to the Party apparatus. But, in addition, it meant that one man was responsible for the Party. The first Political Officer was relatively ineffectual; but he was succeeded in April 1923 by a man of considerable energy and ability, Frank Smithies. In his early forties, Smithies was a long-standing member of the SDF; he was in a position to organise his own time, earning his living after 1921 as a conjurer and Punch-and-Judy man.<sup>94</sup> He also had the good fortune to take on the post when the Labour vote in Edinburgh was growing most rapidly.<sup>95</sup> Apart from pressing on with the development of local organisation,<sup>96</sup> Smithies fought to expand and consolidate the role of the Political Officer, ensuring, for instance, that he should attend all selection conferences as of right.

The gradual strengthening of the divisional Labour Parties continued over the following years, helped, no doubt, by Labour's successes at the general elections of 1922, 1923, and 1924.<sup>98</sup> By the spring of 1924 the Trades and Labour Council was claiming that 'Ward Committees have been established in all wards of the City, and are working energetically.'<sup>99</sup> As a result, the status and strength of

92. Ibid., 21 March, 4 April 1922.

93. Edin. T&LC, Constitution and Rules (Edin. 1922), 8.

94. I am grateful to Dr. F. Smithies, of Cambridge, for biographical information about his father.

95. See Appendix A.

96. The development of Labour Party organisation is surveyed in Appendix A.

97. T&LC minutes, 18 December 1923.

98. Although, nationally, 1924 was a small setback for Labour, in Edinburgh the Party captured its second seat.

99. T&LC AR 1924, 7.

the Party, in relation to other sections of the movement, improved. Of course, many of the ward committees were weak creatures; and the ILP continued to be the main source of active support. But the divisional Labour Party delegates were, in the main, more assiduous in their attendance at the (governing) Council's meetings (as table 10.1, shows). Thus, in large part, they determined the political direction of the movement as a whole.

Table 10.1 Participation of ILP and Labour Party delegates in Trades and Labour Council

	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926
	-21	-22	-23	-24	-25	-26	-27
No. of delegates: LP	18	21	24	27	30	30	31
ILP	9	6	6	15	20	21	23
Mean no. of meetings attended by each delegate (a):							
LP	8.00	6.43	10.12	5.52	5.97(b)	10.00(b)	7.13
ILP	8.00	16.00	7.83	4.46	7.80(b)	4.48(b)	5.78
Mean no. of delegates attending each meeting (a)							
LP	5.33	5.40	9.35	5.52	5.59(b)	8.33(b)	7.89
ILP	2.66	3.84	1.81	2.48	4.87(b)	2.61(b)	4.75

Notes: (a) because the number of meetings held varied from year to year, the figures are not strictly comparable between years; (b) this is especially true for 1924-25 and 1925-26, when substantially more meetings were held.

Source: calculated from T&LC ARs, each year.

Increasingly, too, the DLPs began to exercise a certain autonomous authority, in relation to elections at least - and, so far as Labour Socialism was concerned, could be a counter-weight to the Trades and Labour Council when the left gained a (temporary) ascendancy. When, for instance, a Council Executive member and ILP leftist 'called Ramsay MacDonald a traitor' at a Council meeting,<sup>100</sup> she was forced to resign as a Town Council candidate by her Ward

100. T&LC minutes, 18 August 1925.



Committee and DLP, despite support from the Trades and Labour Council.<sup>101</sup> In addition, whilst the DLPs could not directly affect the activities of the various other labour political parties, the latter - above all, the ILP and the Communist Party - could be 'boxed-in' by a variety of means; prevented from gaining access to important areas. In 1924, for instance, as table 10.1 suggests, the ILP seems to have made an effort to assert its authority within the local movement: the Trades and Labour Council made sure it did not succeed. The ILP was forbidden to ask union branches for money without the Council's approval;<sup>102</sup> the Central ILP branch was excluded from the East Division parliamentary nomination meeting;<sup>103</sup> an attempt by an ILP branch to summon a parliamentary selection meeting in South Edinburgh was severely squashed.<sup>104</sup> The process by which the Communist Party's influence was attacked, though similar, was more protracted; we shall deal with this later in the chapter.

#### 10.5 The Labour Socialist coalition and the Labour left

Most of the Labour left in the early and mid-twenties was grouped in the ILP. The ILP had always, of course, been noted for its missionary zeal, and this was the basis of Labour Socialism's coalition with the left. In essence, the ILP, and the left, was permitted, even encouraged, to indulge in propaganda; generally, no bounds were put on this. The Trades and Labour Council did not, for instance, attempt to control the ILP's public speakers, or reprimand them for unacceptable utterances. Within this sphere, the ILP was very active; the left was involved in much work. And because, as Dowse has pointed out, the ILP in the early 'twenties had

101. Ibid., 1, 8, 25 September 1925.

102. T&LC minutes, 25 March 1924; Appendix A implies that this prohibition may not always have been effective.

103. Ibid., 8 July 1924: ILP branches were not delineated by ward or parliamentary boundaries, and the Central branch would have had a number of members in East Edinburgh.

104. Ibid., 14 October 1924.

'no conception of a disciplined and centralised party permeating the looser organisation of the Labour Party,'<sup>105</sup> when it did wander outside its appointed area, it tended to do so in a confused and ineffectual way. These 'frontier skirmishes' became more common from 1923 onwards, as the ILP drove to strengthen its organisation and increase its membership and number of branches; and as, in reaction to the experience of the Labour Government, the ILP left attempted to change the nature of its Party. But they remained the exception: in general, the achievement of the ILP was its enabling radical opinions to be expressed, but in an institutional context which minimised their effect on the direction of Labour politics.

The ILP, in the years after 1921, had many policies; it contained both constitutionalists and apostles of direct action. But both shared an assumption - rather than an explicit strategy - that the working class could be won to socialism within the framework of a capitalist society, by the creation of an all-embracing socialist movement. This was, indeed, common ground with Labour Socialism, although they might have differed on the content of 'socialism', and on how this socialist faith would lead to political change. (For the ILP left the Labour Socialist assumption of social unity, of society as an organism evolving toward a true essence, was unfounded: the left saw the winning of the workers to socialism as a necessary precondition of mobilising them against the rule of Capital.) We now look briefly at three major areas into which the left's energies were channelled: the organisational and propaganda work of the ILP; the socialist movement's attempts to integrate the young; and the promotion of a local labour paper, The Labour Standard.

The ILP reached a peak of membership in 1920, from which it declined over the following two years. But from 1922, under a new national leadership, and spurred by the election results of that year,

105. Dowse, 71.



it embarked on a period of furious organisational growth; Scotland made the pace.<sup>106</sup> The increases in the number of ILP branches in Edinburgh, and in their total membership, were dramatic; although the figures in table 10.2 are not a wholly reliable guide (ILP

Table 10.2		The ILP in Edinburgh, 1919 – 1927			
Year (a)	No. of branches:		T&LC affiliation fees:		
	affiliated to T&LC	paying affiliation fees to T&LC	amount paid	no. of members paid for	
1919/20	3	4	£1 13s 8d	n.a.(b)	
1920/21	(Edin. 4)	3	£5 8s 4d	325(c))	401
	(Leith. 1)	1	19s 0d	76(c))	
1921/22	2	4	£5 7s 10d	323	
1922/23	2	4	£4 8s 4d	265	
1923/24	5	3	£4 8s 4d	265	
1924/25	8	5	£6 12s 0d	396	
1925/26 (d)	9	8	£10 5s 6d	616	
1926/27	10	8	£9 13s 2d	579	

Notes: (a) 1 April – 31 March; (b) no record survives of the fee scales for the Edinburgh LP before amalgamation; (c) the affiliation fee to Edinburgh T&LC was 4d. per member throughout; the affiliation fee to Leith United TC & LP was 3d. per member; (d) the Central ILP Women's section was also affiliated in 1925-26, paying 6s8d.(representing 20 members): it has been excluded from these figures, on the ground that its members were probably also members of the Central branch proper.

Sources: T&LC AR, each year; T& LC Rules, 1922; Leith United TC & LP Rules, 1918.

branches were not obliged to affiliate to the Trades and Labour Council, and there was no effective method of ensuring affiliation on full membership), the scale of the changes leaves little room for doubt.<sup>107</sup> The early and mid-'twenties was a period of massive upheaval for the ILP in Edinburgh. New members had to be integrated,

106. Ibid., esp. ch. 7; Marwick, 'ILP', esp. 222-9.

107. This picture is also supported by surviving records of affiliation fees to ILP head office (Affiliation Fees ... Year Ending February 1927, ILP papers, LSE); and by the estimate of Marwick, 'ILP', 228.

educated into the outlook and methods of the ILP. Branch management was a major problem; many branch officials were inexperienced, and themselves needed training. And this is to leave aside the Party's political work: 'doing propaganda, ... watching our interests within the Labour Party,' and so forth.<sup>108</sup> It is clear that the organisational problems were but partially surmounted, not least because all the ILP's local officials were volunteers. A special report on the ILP's Scottish organisation found that in Edinburgh 'there is not the proper spirit amongst the Federation officials;' and that

We have no co-ordinate scheme in attending to the needs of the area, and I am afraid we cannot get the best results until full time work in organising the district is established. 109

We have seen that the ILP's interventions in the work of the Trades and Labour Council were ineffectual, and that its delegates were erratic participants. In late 1926 the Chairman of the Council, in the course of a speech to a local ILP branch, made a revealing observation:

Six years' membership of the ILP, he said, had left him woefully lacking in Socialism, but it had imbued in him a taste for literature. I.L.P. literature was second to none at the present time. 110

Where the first comment is a reflection both on the character of the ILP's socialism, and on the problems it encountered in integrating new members over these years, the second points to that strength of the ILP, its propaganda.

For the author of the Special Report on the Scottish ILP, organisational inadequacies were important because they meant 'we are not getting the best service' from 'quite a number of good propagandists in Edinburgh.'<sup>111</sup> 'Propaganda' was evangelism: the work

108. 'Special Report', Division 1: Scotland', ILP papers, LSE. This was prepared for the ILP NAC, probably in 1927.

109. Ibid.

110. Labour Standard, 9 October 1926.

111. 'Special Report'.



of able speakers at public meetings, and acknowledged to be the ILP's main task. Its purpose was 'the creation of an atmosphere in the country', among 'the great mass of non-political voters, who have little time or inclination for prolonged and intensive study of a political issue.

They tend to have a vague fear of new methods and ideas. They are suspicious of social changes. It is the work of the propagandist to make the new idea familiar, by explanation, discussion and repetition, until that intangible but formidable distrust, gives place to an atmosphere of confidence .... 112

The bulk of the propagandists were local men (and some women), schooled in the cut-and-thrust of the street-corner meeting; but on occasion a nationally-renowned speaker (Maxton, for instance) would be billed. The pattern was well-established: a planned programme of winter meetings, indoors, mostly in ILP halls; and, in the summer and at election times, on street-corners.<sup>113</sup>

The ILP's conception of a socialist movement extended from cradle to grave. Where for adults there was propaganda, for children there were Socialist Sunday Schools, and the Guild of Youth. By a process of 'permeation', the young would grow into the movement.<sup>114</sup> One of the 'Woman's Outlook' columns in The Labour Standard, explained how

At our [Socialist Sunday] schools we try to point out to the children how these things can be put right by the people owning the land, and using it for the benefit of all, instead of its being used under the present system of private ownership, for the benefit of the lucky few. ... the basic aim of our Socialist teaching is human equality. 115

112. M.Pallister, The Orange Box. Thoughts of a Socialist Propagandist (London 1924), 8-9. This short (62 page) volume is an excellent introduction to the ILP's propagandist methods, by an experienced and celebrated exponent.
113. For accounts of local propaganda, see Labour Standard, 3 October 1925, 2 October, 25 December, 1926. Pallister, 47-51, argues that the growing number of women voters needed a different approach: in Edinburgh, there is little sign of this.
114. Pallister, 52.
115. Labour Standard, 19 September 1925. Cp F.Reid, 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, 1892-1939', Int.Rev.Soc.Hist 11, 1966, 18-47.

The link between the Sunday Schools and the 'adult organisation' was the ILP Guild of Youth, whose object was

to give an opportunity for the  
physical, intellectual and  
aesthetic development of young  
people between the ages of  
fourteen and twenty-five years. 116

In 1925 the seven guilds in Edinburgh had a total membership of 350: activities included football, socials, whist drives, educational meetings (most were affiliated to the Labour College), theatre visits ('a large party of enthusiasts' saw Shaw's Saint Joan at the King's Theatre).<sup>117</sup> Their Cycle Club went on 'runs throughout the Lothians', sometimes stopping to spread the word ('last weekend, a propaganda meeting held in Dunbar: quite quickly a crowd gathered around the 26 cyclists').<sup>118</sup>

This, then, was the politics of the ILP: much effort, much enthusiasm, but directed so as to win the hearts and minds of the workers, rather than to intervene in the politics of the Labour Party - and not always well-directed. But the commitment of many ILP members to their own conception of political method, and to their Party, is undoubted. One illustration will suffice: in early 1926, Leith ILP moved to new premises.

The work of adaptation [of two  
wooden huts into a hall to seat  
300] cost nothing, beyond the  
material required.... Morris's  
'News from Nowhere' came true;  
friends from near and far came  
to assist in the work. Only  
devotion to a cause could perform  
such a transformation as can to-  
day be seen at Bonnington Toll. 119

Perhaps the supreme example of co-operation between Labour socialism and the ILP left in Edinburgh was the formation and publishing of a weekly Labour newspaper. As early as 1919 the Trades Council had thought a Scottish Labour daily 'long overdue', for the 'capitalistic

116. Ibid., 24 October 1925.

117. Ibid., 24 October 1925, 6 June 1926.

118. Ibid., 17 July 1926.

119. Ibid., 1 May 1926.



press ... misrepresents the cause of the workers and is biased in the employers' interests';<sup>120</sup> but this proposal had no result. In 1920 the Trades and Labour Council had made a half-hearted attempt to set up a local Labour paper, but the scheme was ill-founded, and came to naught.<sup>121</sup> It was in January 1924 that the Council became involved in discussions with members of the ILP: this led to a committee's being formed with representation from the Council, the ILP, Labour Parties and trade unions from throughout the Lothians.<sup>122</sup> A business manager-cum-editor was appointed (an ILP stalwart), a company formed, and the first issue of The Labour Standard appeared on the streets on 21 February 1925. It was, indeed, a paper in the ILP tradition: although (contrary to early fears) the newsagents did sell it, all its contributors were unpaid, and all its (£500) capital was raised from the labour movement.<sup>123</sup>

In many ways, the paper was a success: its journalism was of a remarkably high standard, considering that it was entirely the product of voluntary effort. Its columns were open to a wide range of views - perhaps just because, if this voluntary commitment was to be sustained, no narrow definitions could be imposed. It made an impact on local politics. But it never achieved its target circulation of 10,000; advertising revenue must have been small. Only nine months after starting, 'finance was urgently needed', and by mid-1926 it was obliged to reduce its number of pages to four.<sup>124</sup>

Let us summarise our discussion thus far. When the basis of syndicalist and revolutionary influence subsided during 1920 and 1921,

120. TC minutes, 11 March 1919.

121. T&LC minutes, 7, 14 September, 12 October 1920.

122. Ibid., 6, 8, 13, 22 January, 10 February 1924. The Committee was made up thus: representing ILP branches: 5; LP branches: 3 (all from outside Edinburgh); CP: 1; University LP: 1; TU branches: 5; T&LC: 3; and the business manager. The Labour Standard was thus, technically, not an 'ILP paper' (as Harrison et al. assert), though its editorial policy was of the ILP left. cp R.Harrison, G.Woolven, R.Duncan, The Warwick Guide to British Labour Periodicals, 1790-1970. (Hassocks, 1977), 268.

123. T&LC minutes, 10, 19 February, 19 August, 7, 14 October 1924; Labour Standard advertising leaflet.

124. T&LC minutes, 20 October 1925; Labour Standard, 2 June 1926.

Labour Socialism developed a strategic vision which enabled it to build coalitions, over certain issues and within more or less limited spheres, with two vital political traditions: labourism and the ILP left. Two principles underpinned the Labour Socialist vision, and allowed these coalitions to be generated: firstly, that political and industrial action were distinct; secondly, that political action was constitutional action. These made it possible for Labour Socialism to find common ground with trade union labourism and with the ILP left: in each case, it required an acceptance that their efforts would be limited to certain categories of activity. In particular, trade unions were offered a path to working class power which did not put them in the front line, whilst the ILP was encouraged to continue in the strategy to which it had long adhered.

#### 10.6 The Marxist coalition and the syndicalist tradition

Ultimately, of course, the Labour Socialist coalition was victorious: but it was consistently criticised - and sometimes threatened - by Marxism. Marxism had two main institutional forms in 'twenties Edinburgh: the Labour College movement and, above all, the Communist Party. These played different roles. The Labour College ensured that the City's labour movement was permeated by a substantial number of people who took Marxist views - or at least some Marxist views - for granted; and it successfully established a belief, even among those who were not Marxists, that 'Marx gave Socialism a scientific foundation by looking at history through working-class spectacles'.<sup>125</sup> The Party was different. Its notion of Marxism was more specific, linking broad understandings to firm

125. Michael Marcus, B.L., 'Leaders of Modern Democracy.I.- Karl Marx', Labour Standard 17 April 1926. Marcus, an ILP member, was MP for Dundee from 1929: he was described as one of the 'safe men' in the PLP under MacDonald (Anon., The Scottish Socialists. A Gallery of Contemporary Portraits (London 1931), 237).



(if sometimes changing) views on strategy. It intervened politically, both in industry and elsewhere. It can be seen, perhaps, as playing a role analogous to that of the Labour Socialists, for it too attempted to alter the pattern of labour politics: forging new allegiances, changing concepts of the political, and so forth. Like the Labour Socialists, the Communists could achieve little unless they succeeded in mobilising the support of other sections of labour: again, given the fragmented nature of class consciousness, this was more likely to be achieved in relation to particular issues, and to particular legitimising principles, than in general.

There were two political tendencies with which Communism could hope to find significant common ground. One we may term syndicalism - but using this term in a wide sense, to include many forms of militant or revolutionary trade unionism. The second was the ILP left. (There might, on occasion, be ground for common action with labourism: but this would only be likely to occur in extreme circumstances, as during a strike.) With both it achieved a substantial degree of co-operation, although for different reasons this did not prove well-founded. Let us now look at the Marxists' relationship with these two political traditions.

Marxism, and particularly Communism, very largely succeeded in weaving the various threads of revolutionary trade union theory and practice into a single strand. There is no question but that, from 1921 or 1922 onward, the Communists set the agenda for theoretical strategic debate in this area. Unfortunately for them, each of the threads which they sought to weave had weakened markedly since the heady days of 1917-1920, and the final product was decidedly frayed. Local Marxists had begun to proselytise for the Red International of Labour Unions<sup>126</sup> early in 1921, perhaps even before a

126. Until the late summer of 1921, the Provisional International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions - but even then, colloquially, the 'Red International'. Cp NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 24 April 1921; T&LC minutes, 5, 12 July, 2, 23 August 1921; Klugmann, Communist Party I, 108-11.

local branch of the Communist Party was formed.<sup>127</sup> Their argument was a simple one:

The Capitalist system is forcing us  
to the point where we will be forced  
to fight, and we must be prepared,  
nationally and internationally.  
Thus the need of the Red Trade  
Union .... 128

But it was attractive: it offered the possibility of separate, revolutionary, unions, but it did not require individual trade unionists or union branches to move in isolation; and it stretched out an arm of international support to trade union revolutionaries who were under great pressure at home. (It is perhaps no coincidence that the No. 1 branch of the Railwaymen voted 'to affiliate to the Moscow International' just nine days after 'Black Friday'.)<sup>129</sup> Certainly it is possible that they believed, or at least hoped, that the existence of the revolutionary government in Russia would make far more practical difference to the working class movement in Britain than proved, in the event, to be the case. But the main problem was that, as we have seen, the economic basis of working class strength was eroding - and, with it, the basis of revolutionary strength in industry.

Two examples will illustrate this problem. Although, firstly, the shop stewards movement in engineering and shipbuilding had never been strongest in Edinburgh, it had made some mark during 1918 and early 1919. One of its most prominent leaders, as mentioned before, was Bob Foulis, a Labour parliamentary candidate who left the ILP to join the Communists. It was he who became Scottish Organiser of the Red International in 1921.<sup>130</sup> Yet it was he, too, who in September of the same year was a leader of the unemployed in Edinburgh:<sup>131</sup> the

127. There is no firm evidence on when a branch of the CP was first formed in Edinburgh. Fred Douglas (Evening Dispatch, 11 August 1955) recalls attending 'the rules conference' in Manchester as an Edinburgh delegate: this was held on 23-24 April 1921.

128. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 24 April 1921.

129. Ibid.

130. T&LC minutes, 23 August, 6 September 1921.

131. Ibid., 20 September 1921. This was the common lot throughout the country: cp, e.g., W. Hannington, Unemployed Struggles, esp. 1-11.



militant shop stewards had lost their base in the workshops.

Secondly, among the Railwaymen the dismissals of 1921 had undercut the syndicalists' support. The revolutionary rhetoric of 1919-1920 was supplanted by a sectionalist labourism which continued to use the language of 'industrial unionism', but for very different purposes. It was no accident, for instance, that some of the syndicalists joined ASLEF in 1924: during the ASLEF strike, the Edinburgh NUR's footplatemen had voted overwhelmingly to strike with them; the No. 1 branch then voted to tell

our Loco members to immediately return  
to work and thereby preserve the  
principle of one Union for Railwaymen. 132

This labourism, could, of course, justify solid and militant action, as, say, in the General Strike: but the No. 1 branch's reaction to the latter is telling. At a mass meeting, it agreed

a vote of censure on our leaders for  
their lack of foresight in leading  
us into a/n/ illegal strike. 133

This was a long way from revolutionary syndicalism.

In this situation, the coherence of the syndicalist tradition was seriously threatened. The extent to which Communism could find common ground with it was limited: for in practice it was often too weak even to confront an issue in a concerted way. With rare exceptions in Edinburgh,<sup>134</sup> the tradition found expression in just two areas. The first was amongst trade union activists, and especially within the Trades and Labour Council. Here it remained possible for syndicalist and Communist ideas to co-incide in the pursuit of a

132. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 27 January 1924. One man who left the NUR for ASLEF in 1924 was James Stobie. The ill-feeling between sections of the NUR led, in July 1924, to the establishment of a special branch for locomen in Edinburgh: this was explained in the No. 1 branch Jubilee Souvenir, 33, as 'a means to combat the many calumnies of the A.S.L.E.&F., which is largely their stock-in-trade.'

133. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 23 May 1926: only four votes were cast against this resolution.

134. E.g., Communists made significant headway within the railway workshops at St. Margaret's.

number of objectives. Perhaps the main issues were the need for union solidarity and the more effective organisation of the Council: both perspectives saw the former as a consequence of the latter. The view was pressed, on occasion with success, that the Trades Council should properly be seen as, or should turn itself into, a Council of Action - in effect, a general staff of the local labour and trade union movement. For example, in the period leading up to 'Red Friday' in 1925, the Council agreed to establish itself as a Council of Action, appointed a special committee to organise accordingly, and summoned a conference of shop stewards.<sup>135</sup> But this current of thought, which had been so strong five years before, could by this time command a majority on the Trades and Labour Council only in extreme circumstances, and on a limited range of issues. Essentially, these were when large-scale industrial action seemed imminent or unavoidable, as in 1925 and 1926; and (though to a lesser degree) in support of Russia when she seemed threatened by the British government (as over the Curzon ultimatum in 1923).<sup>136</sup> Communism and syndicalism were permanent currents of opinion on the Trades Council. But in normal circumstances their influence was limited. Thus during 1923 and 1924 a number of trade union delegates became concerned that the 'political' role which the Council had taken on since 1920 was hindering the Council's industrial work. This was, of course, an expression of labourist concern. An industrial committee was appointed to consider how these problems could be overcome. Reporting to the Council, the convenor of the committee, a Communist, said that the 'work of [the] Committee had been hampered by a feeling among [union] branches that it was a Communist Com[mit]tee': this, he felt it necessary to point out, 'was not the case'.<sup>137</sup> But the suspicion illustrates a real limitation in Communist influence.

135. T&LC minutes 3 March 1925 (these moves were initiated by a Communist); over 100 delegates attended the conference held two days after 'Red Friday' (ibid., 4 August 1925).

136. T&LC minutes, 8, 15 May, 5, 12, 19 June 1923: although a Council of Action was agreed (after CP pressure) on this occasion, its preparations give an impression of half-heartedness when compared with 1920 or 1925. On this campaign, cp Klugmann, Communist Party, I, 148-57.

137. T&LC minutes, 8 July 1924.



The second area in which the syndicalist tradition of direct industrial action continued to have an impact, and in which Communism was able to take a lead, was the organisation of the unemployed. Fred Douglas describes various tactics designed to press their demands: one, the 'irritation march'

consisted in setting off from the Mound at an ordinary pace. Reaching the West End we wheeled round to march back along Princes Street on the other side. At this point we brought the pace down to dead slow. With a couple of thousand men behind us this meant a traffic jam for a considerable time. 138

They would then speed up, and let out 'barbaric cries' while the police 'helmeted and buttoned up to the chin in blue, heavy serge, sweated to keep abreast, ... and near panic set in among pedestrians'.<sup>139</sup> Such demonstrations could make a considerable impact, and the Unemployed Committees also built up considerable reputations through contesting local elections, 'fighting cases', and 'propaganda'. The only surviving figures suggest that they had perhaps 1500 members in the Edinburgh area<sup>140</sup> - though, if Douglas is to be believed, demonstrations could be rather larger. Yet although these methods succeeded in making unemployment a major issue (it was, for instance, by a long way the matter most frequently discussed at the Trades Council in the early 'twenties), the structural weakness of the unemployed prevented their having any decisive impact. And within the labour movement a coalition of Labour Socialism (which saw the Unemployed Committees as thinly-veiled Communist fronts) and labourism (for which the unemployed were primarily a threat) ensured they remained marginal: frequently listened to and discussed, but always without real power.

138. Evening Dispatch, 12 August 1955.

139. Ibid.

140. T&LC minutes, 28 January 1927: the figures were:- Leith, 400; Edinburgh, 450; Portobello, 360; Musselburgh, 250.

So both syndicalist and Communist traditions could find expression only in limited areas, and were unlikely seriously to influence the movement's direction. Their sources of industrial strength rapidly waned after 1920, re-emerging only for brief periods of militancy. They did not, therefore, have a lasting institutional source of power within the labour movement.

#### 10.7 The Marxist coalition and the Labour left

In January 1926 an epigram appeared, without comment but in a manner indicating endorsement, at the foot of a column in the Labour Standard:

Speaking as one who has broken the law,  
I say most deliberately that it is true  
what the warder said to me when I first  
went into Brixton Prison: 'Cheer up,  
Mr. Lansbury, there is never anything  
accomplished in England till somebody  
goes to prison.' - Mr. GEORGE LANSBURY, M.P. 141

This neatly, if accidentally, encapsulates the motivational basis of the Labour left's relationship with Communism during the early and mid-'twenties. On the one hand, the left saw a state operating in the interests of a single class, and doing so without mercy; this had to be opposed, and not only by parliamentary means. But, on the other, there remained a fundamental assumption that appeal could be made, by exposing the inequity of such class justice, to a wider political community: at root there were a rationality and a justice which transcended those of class, and this rationality and this justice explained society's tendency to progress toward democracy and socialism.<sup>142</sup> It was, of course, this latter assumption which linked the Labour left with Labour Socialism; but the first assumption meant that the left was continually impatient, discontented, with the bounds

141. Labour Standard, 23 January 1926.

142. Macintyre is thus mistaken in asserting that the Labour left's 'crucial characteristic was the commitment to parliamentary action' (Proletarian Science, 63). Certainly in Edinburgh the left was often highly critical of, and sceptical about, parliament.



on political action which the parliamentary process seemed to require. The Labour left was, therefore, always ready to consider tactics similar to the Communists'; perhaps, too, its concept of supra-class justice and rationality was, in practice, little different from the Marxist concept of proletarian justice and reason.

When the Communist Party was formed, in 1920 and 1921, a section of the ILP<sup>left</sup> had, of course, joined it. Especially at a local level, they seem to have regarded this, very much, as a realignment within the Labour movement; and, indeed, it is quite likely that many of those who joined the Communists also remained ILPers.<sup>143</sup> Many of them, however, seem to have drifted away from the Communist Party during the following two or three years, particularly, perhaps, after the reorganisation of the Party (on 'bolshhevik' lines) in 1923.<sup>144</sup> Willie Joss, a prominent Scottish Communist, recorded in 1924 that many 'old-timers ... seem to miss the resounding revolutionary speeches of the earlier movements.'<sup>145</sup> There was, therefore, a close relationship between the ILP left and the Communist Party over the period up to, say, 1924 - a relationship, moreover, which was not political only, but also personal. So when, for instance, Euphemia Laing, a former ILPer, stood as Communist candidate for St. Leonard's ward in the 1921 Town Council election, it is highly likely that she was popularly regarded as the Labour candidate, and that she received support from ILP activists in this ILP stronghold.

But the left's flirtation with Communism was dependent on a concept of the socialist movement which, from 1921 on, rapidly ceased to be a reality. As early as September 1921 the Trades and Labour Council's Executive decided an application for affiliation from the local branch of the Communist Party 'could not be accepted' since their Party was

143. Cp ILP NAC minutes, 28-30 August 1924, on the problem of Communists in the ILP: in reply to enquiries from branches, the NAC held 'it is difficult to understand how a member of the Communist Party could accept the constitution of the ILP'.

144. For a summary of estimates of CP membership, see Macintyre, Proletarian Science, 27-8.

145. W.Joss, 'Three Months of CP Propaganda', Communist Review, November 1924; quoted in Klugmann, Communist Party, I, 332.

not nationally affiliated to the Labour Party.<sup>146</sup> At this time, however, the Council could do little to extend such a ruling beyond mere affiliation - and there is little sign that it would have wished to do so. In that year just four Labour candidates stood in the Town Council elections, for instance, whilst there were also Unemployed, Railway Workers, Ex-Service, and SLP candidates.<sup>147</sup> No narrow definition of the socialist or labour movement could be enforced, therefore; and over a wide spectrum of the left, it is unlikely that one existed. During the following years, up to 1925, however, a definition of the Labour movement was developed and enforced by the alliance of Labourism and Labour Socialism: this definition was initiated nationally, and transmitted to the Edinburgh Labour Party in a series of decisions and meetings; its essence was to exclude Communism by establishing commitment to the parliamentary system as central to Labour Party membership. Ben Shaw, the Scottish Secretary of the Labour Party, explained to the Trades and Labour Council's Executive in 1923, that he

was of opinion that a fundamental difference of policy was shown when Mr. Newbold, M.P. stated in House of Commons that his [Communist] Party did not believe in Parliamentary Government. 148

This, Shaw held, justified a requirement that all delegates to the Council should sign a pledge accepting the constitution and rules of the Labour Party.

If the Labour left and the Communists had been able to consolidate their alliance, this re-orientation of Labour politics might have been resisted with more success than it was. But they were beset by a shortage of issues around which they could work successfully together. The main reason was that their strategy for political change required a scale of mobilisation which, in the economic circumstances of the 1920s, was most difficult to achieve.

146. T&LC minutes, 13 September 1921.

147. The Scotsman, 2 November 1921.

148. T&LC minutes, 11 September 1923 (EC); for a more subtle discussion of British Marxist views on Parliament, see Macintyre, Proletarian Science, 194-7.



Apart from those discussed in the previous section (for the distinction between the Labour left and militant trade unionism was always unclear), there were just two categories of issues on which Communists and the Labour left could make common cause: international issues, and housing. Yet on neither were they able to achieve the level of action which could make their strategy a threat to the electoralism of the Labour Socialist coalition. Let us look briefly at each.

Undoubtedly the Communists brought international questions into the Labour movement to an unprecedented extent. They called for a Council of Action against British sanctions against Russia in 1923;<sup>149</sup> they wanted 'to start a movement in support of German workers' later in the same year;<sup>150</sup> they drew attention in 1925 to 'recent political events' in Bulgaria and Italy, warning of the dangers of a 'seizure of power by Fascism';<sup>151</sup> and so forth. But whilst they could win the - virtually unanimous - support of the labour movement on these, in passing resolutions, they could achieve little else.<sup>152</sup> Symbolic of this, perhaps, was Robert Wilson's decision to make 'Imperialism the Issue' of his campaign in the 1927 Leith by-election. "'I shall," said Mr. Wilson, "make China the acid test of this by-election."' <sup>153</sup> Wilson, a leading local Labour left-winger, did just that - and lost. Hew Robertson, the local Communist organiser, tacitly acknowledged the problem when calling, at a Trades and Labour Council meeting, for 'all active workers in working class bodies ... to pledge support to German workers':

Asked what was meant by pledging support  
Mr. Robertson stated that had not been  
considered by his committee.   154

149. T&LC minutes, 8 May 1923.

150. Ibid., 24 October 1923.

151. Ibid., 7 July 1925.

152. Excepting support for the Workers' International Relief (which had to deny it was a Communist organisation: T&LC minutes, 17 June 1924) and like organisations.

153. Labour Standard, 12 February 1927.

154. T&LC minutes, 24 October 1923.

The problem was precisely the meaning of 'support'. If it was to be simply rhetoric, it would be widely seen as unimportant and uncontroversial: 'unity' would be easy to achieve, but would have little import. If, however, it was to require industrial or political action, the scale of action required was very great, while its effect might be small; and in any case, it would be felt only in far-away climes. It demanded too much in an adverse economic situation. United action on international issues was thus, almost inevitably, ineffectual, and could generate no solid base for a lasting coalition.

After the defeat of the 1920 rent strike, the focus of labour activity on housing shifted from rents to the volume and quality of new housing provision. These were pursued through propaganda (including one excellent pamphlet),<sup>155</sup> deputations, and so forth: the apparatus of 'reasoned' debate with the city authorities. No attempt was made to mobilise people in action, until in 1923 a public meeting was called

to organise against the eviction of  
people for arrears of Rent arising  
from Unemployment or Low Wages. 156

A Central Tenants' Defence League was re-established<sup>157</sup> - soon said to be 'on a functioning basis'.<sup>158</sup> But although similar bodies were formed in Leith and elsewhere; led by the left and by Communists,<sup>159</sup> they seem to have found mass mobilisation exceedingly difficult to achieve. They occupied themselves largely in processing grievances, leading deputations, fighting court cases.<sup>160</sup> On occasion, they expressed a desire to take more radical action: the Leith Tenants' Defence Association, for instance, criticised an attempt to raise money (£25 - £50) for counsel's opinion; the money should have been used to 'fight insanitary dwellings.'<sup>161</sup> But there is no record (in contrast to Clydeside in the same period)<sup>162</sup> of substantial popular action having occurred. Again, this meant that the unity of

155. Edin. T&LC, Our Unseen City Revealed. A Tale of Housing Atrocities (Edin., n.d. [1922]).

156. T&LC minutes, 6 February 1923.

157. Ibid., 13 February 1923.

158. Ibid., 27 February 1923.

159. Labour Standard, 31 October 1925.

160. See, e.g., T&LC minutes, 22 August 1923.

161. Ibid., 19 Sept. 1923.

162. Moorhouse et al., 'Rent Strikes' 136-8



Communists and the left was relatively ineffectual. At the same time, it prevented the Tenants' Defence League from becoming a powerful institution within the movement, and thus ensured that the former's left-wing leadership remained relatively isolated.

The central problems confronting attempts to develop a 'Marxist coalition,' after 1921, therefore, were these. First, the tactics on which the coalition's elements could find common ground were rendered highly problematical by the prevailing economic environment: they demanded large-scale mobilisation. Second, since the tactics were rarely achieved, the institutions which might have given shape and authority to the coalition were also generally absent. (The major exception, of course, was the General Strike.) Thirdly, the organisational developments which the left had supported in 1920-1921 provided the Labour Socialist coalition with an institutional base from which to oppose the left: perhaps as important, electoral activity and 'pure-and-simple' trade unionism provided routine forms of activity for this new organisation. In an adverse political and economic situation, the Marxists were unable to develop a strategy which could offer the type of sustained and regular activity necessary to organisational development.

#### 10.8 Concluding: responses to the General Strike

Probably the supreme achievement of the Marxist coalition was organising, and legitimising, the General Strike over nine days in May 1926.<sup>163</sup> It was a cruel irony that it was Labour Socialism which

163. The General Strike in Edinburgh is very fully covered by MacDougall, 'Edinburgh' in Skelley (ed.), General Strike, 140-59.

reaped the rewards of this achievement - and crueller, perhaps, as the Labour Socialists had little enthusiasm for the Strike,<sup>164</sup> as the labourist union leaders appeared to have 'sold it out', and as it was the industrial militants, Communists, and so forth who bore the brunt of employers' victimisation.<sup>165</sup>

The Strike was experienced as an outstanding achievement of collective working class action. 'From the first our ranks were solid and disciplined.'<sup>166</sup> This had been complemented by 'Splendid Organisation'.<sup>167</sup> Undoubtedly, it was a major achievement of mobilisation; which appears to have had important effects of working class political outlooks. But the defeat of the Strike dealt a powerful blow to strategies, industrial and political, of mass action. For the left, there was much rancour. Why was it called off?

Were the workers showing signs of weakening? Were there holes in our ranks? So far as we heard in Edinburgh, there were none. Then for why? For the sacred shibboleth 'Constitution'? For the alleged threat to the Community? Because miners, railwaymen, transport workers, printers, and a hundred other trades had struck at a community that is themselves, with but a few millions of an antagonistic class in the great minority? So it was. For that and for that alone, the General Strike, even before it had time to reach its height, was called off. <sup>168</sup>

Yet, through the rancour, confidence in the method was destroyed. The sense of despair at this is clear in William Elger's contribution to a Labour College weekend school on the General Strike: a

General Strike could only arise as a spontaneous movement of the rank and file of the workers, and ... therefore ...

164. Cp G.A. Phillips, 'The Labour Party and the General Strike', Llafur 2 (2), 1977, 44-58.

165. MacDougall, 'Edinburgh', esp. 153-4; Labour Standard 29 May 1926; NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 16, 23 May 1926.

166. Labour Standard, 22 May 1926.

167. Ibid.

168. Ibid.



could neither be definitely predicted at any given moment, nor could it be adequately prepared for. In any case, it had only a limited value, and that mainly as a defensive weapon against the aggression of the employers and as a 'political demonstration.' 169

Elger, of course, can hardly be counted on the left, and as secretary of the STUC no doubt felt defensive: but his speech evokes a sense of hopelessness at the ability of the movement to run so major an event. The confidence was gone.

In these circumstances, the Marxists' alliance with other elements of the left could not hold: for the latter, only the electoral strategy offered a way forward.

Let all lip sympathy, hypocritical  
jejunes reckon with a conscious  
awakened electorate in November, 170

the Labour Standard remarked. Those who sought to 'draw political capital out of the results of the strike', and to 'discredit the strike weapon, ... point[ing] with outstretched arm to the ballotbox as the only hope of the workers'<sup>171</sup> - such people reaped the political harvest of the General Strike within the labour movement.

Margaret Cole observed that

what really perished in 1926 was the  
romantic idea; dating from before the  
first world war, of the power of  
syndicalism, 'direct action', and the  
rest of it. 172

In an important sense, she was right. But 1926 could only mark the end of an idea (which had been far more than merely romantic), because the electoral alternative was already strongly positioned to exploit its weakness.

169. Ibid., 9 October 1926.

170. Ibid., 19 June 1926.

171. Ibid., 12 June 1926.

172. Letter in BSSLH 34, 1977, 14.

Conclusion

'The truth is that one cannot choose the form of war one wants, unless from the start one has a crushing superiority over the enemy.'

Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 234.



## Chapter 11

### Conclusion

In the decade or so which began in the midst of the Great War, the politics of labour were reformed. During the last years of the nineteenth century, mainstream trade union opinion had broken with Liberalism, and edged toward an accommodation with socialism on the basis of an independent Labour, electoral strategy. Although this had some success, it was severely challenged by the 'labour unrest' of 1910-1914: in this a coalition of militant trade unionism, industrial unionism, revolutionary syndicalism, and so forth had shown that industrial action could be a major source of power for labour. So when war broke out neither 'parliamentary' nor 'direct action' strategies held sway uncontested within the movement. The war did not destroy these political traditions, but it changed their environment (and overlaid them with new, or at least newly strengthened, bases of allegiance associated with patriotism). This meant that the traditions evolved: responded to changing circumstances; were strengthened, weakened, or altered by such factors as the growth in union strength or Labour's participation in the Lloyd George government. But it also meant that certain aspects of these evolutions became, as it were, recessive, emerging only when patriotic impulses waned after the armistice.

The period from about 1917 until the later 'twenties was a critical one in labour's development. In it, the essential contours of the modern movement were mapped. By the later 'twenties labour

politics were dominated by a coalition centred on an electoral, parliamentary, strategy which was bolstered institutionally. Trade unions had developed structures and methods which assumed they could intervene in 'politics' only through the Labour Party, and which defined unions' roles in a close relationship to collective bargaining. The element which advocated 'extra-parliamentary' political methods (especially industrial action for political purposes) had not been eliminated, but it was confined to a subsidiary role: of criticising what had become the mainstream of labour, of motivating many industrial militants, and so on.

Our study has attempted to contribute to the understanding of this important decade: to examine the processes of labour's reformation in a local context. We have conducted this examination at a number of levels. To begin with, we argued that political 'consciousness' may usefully be regarded as a matrix of (more or less) discrete 'legitimising principles' which can motivate political action for individuals or groups. These principles need not be mutually consistent, even for an individual; but (in general) the more consistent they are, the greater the likelihood of coherent action. For various reasons, essentially associated with the multiplicity of its sub-groupings and the contextual specificity of its institutions, principles generated by the working class are relatively inconsistent, one with another; in particular, they tend to be in contradiction with principles generated by institutions of the ruling class, many of which are asserted verbally within the working class (despite their being generated elsewhere). This tends to produce 'a condition of moral and political passivity'.<sup>1</sup> (Among the ruling class, principles tend to be more consistent, lending themselves more easily to the motivation of action in the class interest.) This view of political consciousness directs our attention toward several factors: the importance of principles which

1. Gramsci, 333.



are common to a number of groups within the working class, and can thus motivate widespread action; the role of institutions in generating and sustaining principles; the importance of the contradiction between ruling and working class principles (aspects of Gramsci's 'theoretical' and 'practical' consciousnesses) in stemming self-interested working class action.

In the light of this approach, we briefly surveyed certain issues concerning the structure of the working class in Edinburgh, and its relationship to the city's middle class. There were grounds for believing that the social distance between classes was strengthened by an increase (from the mid-nineteenth century) in the spatial segregation between their residential areas. This may have encouraged the development of more independent, working class values. Especially during the war, inequalities within the working class (particularly in relation to housing) were compressed: this eroded such intra-class groupings as the 'labour aristocracy'. Nevertheless, after the war, the working class continued to be fragmented in important ways. Some were of long standing, as the city's industrial and occupational diversity. Others were functions of the economic performance of the various industries; unemployment; and similar factors. But the extent of overlapping and intersection of the various sources of fragmentation tended to reduce the significance of any single grouping: a labour aristocracy could not persist when income differentials within industries might be less than those between skilled workers in different industries (especially in so industrially diverse a city). So whilst Edinburgh's working class was by no mean homogeneous, the intensity of its internal divisions seems to have lessened somewhat. As a result, the distinctiveness and incompatibility of the cultural patterns associated with its various groupings probably diminished, so that a common vocabulary of motivation could become more widely held and effective.

The impact of this trend should not, however, be exaggerated: overall, Edinburgh's working class remained more diversified and fragmented than that of many other towns and cities. Nor did it imply

of necessity a greater receptiveness to the principles by which trade unions and labour political organisations attempted to motivate action: although this was a possible outcome, it might alternatively imply an increased inclination to take concerted action in response to principles deployed by elements of the ruling class. Certainly in wartime the vocabulary of patriotism was extremely effective, for instance. But we may surmise that, after the war, no similarly effective language could be found to replace it. The strength of (and the existence of a legitimate role for) labour appears to have been accepted; no attempt seems to have been made, by the state or the major non-labour political parties (at least after the fall of Lloyd George), actively to mobilise working class opinion. Rather, they appear to have relied upon the contradictions between theoretical and practical consciousness producing 'moral and political passivity' - or, as the Labour Standard had it, 'Apathy! Apathy! Apathy!'<sup>2</sup> In Edinburgh, an effective anti-labour strategy at this level may have been made still more problematic by the diversity of the city's middle class, riven at it was by differences between professional, administrative and financial sectors, and by status differences within these also.

The significance of the labour movement's development during the decade after 1917 suggests that short-run, as well as long-term, factors were important. In relation to union growth, no adequate explanation is to be found in general accounts of late nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial development. At the same time, the experience of widely differing industries was of union advance during and just after the war, followed by retreat from about 1920. Although this took different forms in various industries, neither can we be satisfied with explanations which rest on the specific features of their industrial development. Rather, we suggest that fundamental short-term changes occurred during the war whose effects were felt in all sectors of industry (though there

2. Labour Standard, 21 March 1925; cp Macintyre, Proletarian Science, esp. 198-218.



was some variation in their particular manifestations).

These changes were of two broad types. Firstly, the balance of power in industry shifted in favour of workers, as the war effort intensified the need for high levels of production: in general, the demand for labour now outstripped its supply. This persisted into the post-war boom period of 1919-1920. But, secondly, and equally important, a number of factors combined to enable this power to be exercised: in effect, not only was labour stronger; it felt its strength - and the justice of its actions - more. Chiefly, the factors stemmed from the war: the central role of the state in industry, the importance of notions such as 'profiteering', working people's sacrifice in France, and so forth. These meant that notions such as 'efficiency' and 'organisation' became distanced from commonly associated notions (above all, 'profit'); increasingly, they became effective in legitimising action in the labour interest. By the same token, of course, they became less effective as principles legitimising action by employers. In a number of respects, moreover, the law became less unfavourable to unions; while the state was less concerned with employers' rights and profits than with ensuring continuity of production. Finally, the problems generated by the war - rising prices, above all - were such as could link general principles to workplace action. During 1919 and early 1920 these factors continued to hold sway; they were compounded by the loss of self-confidence which occurred among important elements of capital and the state. With revolution apparently on the agenda, material concessions could seem a cheap insurance.

In effect, therefore, the motivational basis of trade union advance during and immediately after the war was a fortuitous consequence of the international conflict. To be sure, the notions to which the latter lent strength were interpreted in the light of workers' experiences: but, fundamentally, they were available to labour because of the changes in the meaning of the 'nation' and in

the operation of state and economy, which total commitment to the war entailed. In order to ensure sustained and active working class support for the war effort, the latter required justification in a vocabulary acceptable to workers: yet deployment of such a vocabulary by the dominant political institutions was, ipso facto, a strengthening of it, and an opening of it to more effective use by labour in its own interest. In Gramsci's language, the contradiction between theoretical and practical consciousness had been reduced by the ruling class's having shifted the former more into line with the latter: the working class was thus more likely to act, but also to act in its own interests.

Labour politics were also affected by the war; but its influence was less unambiguously positive than it was for the trade unions. The pre-war labour movement had been by no means united on method, but the question of whether or not the war was justified split virtually every section of the movement. The achievement of united action consequently became more difficult. Wartime events led to the development of two conceptions of political action within the movement. One drew strength from the power of the wartime state, and saw labour's task as the winning of control over the state. The second drew strength from the power of the wartime trade union movement. But these images of politics developed in a period when nationalism, patriotism, was the fundamental determinant of allegiances within the labour movement: during the war, they did not structure coherent political groupings or coalitions. Indeed, since they were not mutually exclusive, individuals often drew on both perspectives.

During 1919 and 1920 patriotism ceased to be very effective as a principle legitimising action within the working class: or, rather, having formed the foundation of a coalition supportive of a 'national' effort, it now became, if anything, supportive of a general improvement of working class self-confidence and assertion independent of other classes. But within the working class, the images of political action which had been developing (but secondary and ineffective) during the war, remained indistinct. Trade union action continued to seem an important path to political power,



particularly since electoral methods (which had in any case become less prominent during the war) seemed increasingly unlikely to be effective after the 1918 general election, and the municipal contest of 1919. At the same time, both 'right' and 'left' continued to stress the power of the state: many had experience of it during the war; for many, the Bolshevik revolution shewed the importance of gaining control of the state. In short, this immediate post-war period was one of ferment in which confusion reigned concerning the strategic issues in labour's political advance; no clear allegiances had developed within the movement.

In this situation, a broad coalition formed, based on some of the motives which had become available to labour during the war: primarily, those associated with 'efficiency' and 'organisation'. This coalition was limited to the restructuring of the labour movement itself: it carried through the amalgamation of the Trades Council and the Labour Party, and, at another level, brought most of the city's disparate Marxist elements into the Communist Party. It was based on the assumption that efficiency was an inherent attribute of certain organisational structures; all could thus concur on organisational change, for the structure created would be appropriate to all political tasks. The organisational form perceived as efficient was centralised and hierarchical, drawing not only on managerial images (and, to some extent, managerial practice), but also drawing strength from military organisation, and from the state's methods of controlling the wartime economy. This structure promised unity in action: disagreements would be settled in a central, representative forum (the Trades and Labour Council, in our particular instance; but by analogy the TUC, Labour Party Conference, or whatever); thereafter, all elements of the movement would act in concert, directed by central organs supported by a central administration. The virtues of such a structure were acknowledged at once in both political and industrial spheres.

Yet the reorganisation achieved within this perspective did not produce structures which were - so to say - neutral between different strategies. The structures were not universally efficient; and, when combined with a number of other factors, their effect, over the following years, was to enable the right of the movement to establish an ascendancy. Such 'mechanistic' structures are effective chiefly when their environment is stable, and when the commitment of their constituent individuals and institutions is assured. These conditions were largely fulfilled in the actual prosecution of industrial (and other 'direct') action during 1919 and 1920: the action was relatively brief, so the environment was quite stable; the objectives and methods were (more or less) clear; attitudes were militant. Nevertheless, many of the wartime and immediate post-war advances were in fact achieved not by such structures, but despite them. The enormous expansion of union membership, for instance, depended upon the ability of groups of workers to act on their own initiative - it required an acceptance of common aims and attitudes, but not strong, centralised resources. But this went largely unrecognised. The expansion was perceived as achievement despite a lack of organisation, rather than as being contingent upon the existence of a distinct, looser, type of organisation, albeit in embryonic form: it was consequently taken to indicate how much greater the advances might be if all were properly 'co-ordinated'.

Moreover, to see but a single, and universally efficient, form of organisation was artificially to divorce technical structures from their moral, their motivational, context. Thus it was that organisation and propaganda were widely seen as distinct: the latter was a task of certain organisations, but organisation itself was not seen as intimately associated with the moral climate in which it existed. Though unions developed strong, centralised, structures, they



saw propaganda as a task which belonged elsewhere, and did not develop central propagandist institutions; the Trades and Labour Council's attempts to forge unity in political outlook among its constituent elements were desultory.

Whether the labour movement could have developed strong, mobilising, institutions during 1917-1920 must be doubtful: even coping with the administrative burdens of growth stretched its resources to their limits. Whether such institutions could have survived the rigours of depression is still more uncertain. From 1920 onward the balance of power in industry turned against labour. Unions were weakened; in more recently organised sectors, sometimes eliminated. At the same time, the balance of legitimation shifted away from the working class: press support for union objectives evaporated; state recognition was increasingly restricted to very narrow definitions of union activity; working class purchase on notions of 'efficiency', 'organisation', and so forth was reduced as wartime understandings became more distant; above all, few problems were now soluble within the workplace - and even where issues did exist, unions might be unable to mobilise around them. As a result, the degree of unity of purpose within the trade union movement deteriorated: its central aims became less widely powerful; sectional and self-interested motives became more pronounced; it became more difficult to achieve united action around common principles.

Similar problems beset labour politics. Industrial action seemed less and less a realistic path to political power; 'direct action' of other kinds also began to fail for lack of mass support. It was in these circumstances that the strategic 'bias' inherent in the movement's images and structures of organisation began to reveal itself. The prevalence of mechanistic structures and images encouraged union organisations - at every level - to respond to their new environment in certain ways. Firstly, they came to see

propaganda as important (though they did not link it with a critique of organisation which went beyond existing models). Second, since propaganda did not bring success, they took steps to strengthen the coherence of their structures: in particular, internal discipline was tightened. Thirdly, they attempted to stabilise their external environment. In this they could, of course, have only limited success; but though they could not control it, they could attempt to minimise its unpredictability. In industrial relations, this meant supporting national bargaining, 'procedure', and so forth. In politics, it implied support for a strategy which encouraged the construction of stable institutions, and minimised the exposure of union institutions to weakening through political conflict.

All these responses shifted union opinion away from support for 'revolutionary industrial methods'. At the same time, a coherent Labour Socialist grouping began to form, criticising the policies of 'direct action' increasingly vociferously as the latter's successes became rarer. Under these pressures, the shallow foundations of labour's post-war coalition were undermined. The electoral strategy now became the foundation of a new coalition, in which Labour Socialism was able to unite the Labour left with trade union labourism. Based on a clear distinction between political and industrial action (and a definition of the former in constitutional-electoral terms), this permitted the development of routinised forms of political activity, and institutions, which were a vital counterweight to the development of a leftist (what we have termed 'Marxist') coalition. Initially unstable, because based around a limited range of issues, the 'Labour Socialist coalition' was, by the later 'twenties, possessed of a strong institutional base which could resist the lure of more radical conceptions of 'politics' even (say) after the debacle of 1931. For its competitor, the current based around revolutionary socialism and industrial militancy, and now led by the Communist Party, was unable to develop countervailing institutions; it could win widespread support only in situations of



militant industrial action - and these were neither lasting enough, nor successful enough, to enable its consolidation.

Our account has not simply restated standard versions of labour's development, adding a little local colour. We have, of course, broadly confirmed that revolutionary socialists had been confined to a marginal role in the labour movement by the later 1920s: to have found otherwise would have been surprising indeed. But our theoretical perspective, together with our local research base, have allowed us to add to existing accounts in a number of ways. Three, perhaps, we should here briefly restate.

We have, firstly, been able to stress the shifting sources of political motivation, and their effect on labour politics. This has shewn the importance of the transition from a wartime (and immediate post-war) phase, during which dominant political and social institutions gave some support to labour interests, to a period when this support dissipated. We do not claim that the working class is incapable of generating comparable institutional sources of political motivation; but that it did not is clear. But we also pointed to the importance of the character of the support given. The wartime, and immediate post-war, state and ruling class made concessions at this motivational level partly because they seemed necessary for the winning of workers' support for the war; but partly because they had no choice. But even where the concessions were unplanned, their impact was selective. If the working class, for instance, gained unprecedented purchase over notions of organisation and efficiency, how it could use them was significantly determined by their historically- and socially-given meanings. This was not a cunning ruling class plot: but it was important.

Second, by breaking down the sources of legitimation of political action, and discussing their content, we have been able to chart some of the complex processes by which coalitions are

formed, sustained, and broken down. By shewing the relationship between the building of these alliances and the specific principles on which they are based, we have been able to move away from the assumption - so strong, for instance, in Miliband's work<sup>3</sup> - that parliamentary methods have always been fundamental to Labour politics, towards an explanation of how this came about. In particular, it has been valuable to view alliances in terms of the principles which underlie them; and to recognise the propensity of individuals and institutions to hold (albeit an inchoate and fragmentary form), simultaneously, principles which may legitimise more than one - and perhaps inconsistent - courses of action.

We have, thirdly, tried to examine the development of labour organisation (both industrial and political) without supposing them necessarily to have been in a process of evolution toward an absolutely superior organisational form.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, we have attempted to recognise the importance of context in determining the appositeness of specific forms; it is, in short, significant that the trade union and labour movement developed the structure that it did. This has enabled us to view the development of the Labour Party in a new light: not as, from the beginning, an independent institution affected by a range of external and internal factors, but as an institutional element of a wider 'organisation' (a labour movement), with shifting internal relationships. Only from about 1922 or 1923 could the Labour Party genuinely be termed an independent institution; not until the later 'twenties had it established a supremacy over the politics of the labour movement.

Let us conclude by making some observations on future research. This study has been based upon two essential propositions. It is, on the one hand, not only the political predilections of historians

3. Parliamentary Socialism.

4. Such assumptions are implied even in the title of McKibbin's Evolution of the Labour Party - a study of party organisation. Cp also Winter, Socialism and Challenge of War; Hinton and Hyman.



which can bias our understandings of labour history; indeed, these are of less import than their methodological and theoretical presuppositions, for in general the former are public, while the latter may be obscure even to the author. Empirical research should, then, be complemented by methodological criticism. On the other hand, we have held that our understanding of labour politics, the politics of the working class, must be truncated unless we are prepared to examine their social and industrial generation in the lives of working men and women; this implies the necessity for local studies. Ours has shown, for instance, significant areas of divergence from the experience of the Clydeside. Perhaps Edinburgh was more typical: perhaps neither was. Further studies might concentrate, too, on areas we have but touched upon: the importance of residential factors in the development of political attitudes and organisation, for instance; or a more quantitative study of the relationship between industrial background and union and political behaviour. During the later 'twenties Labour's growth in local government was to have an effect on the Party's direction. But only through shifting the focus of research away from national institutions, which are already well covered, and toward the local experiences of working people, will we be able properly to understand the complex inter-play of motives and organisation which reformed the British labour movement after the Great War.

Appendices and Bibliography



## Appendix A

### Labour Party Organisation in Edinburgh, 1917 - 1927

Few studies exist of the growth of local Labour Party organisation in the early years after 1918;<sup>1</sup> although it is now widely acknowledged that this grew more slowly than, say, McKenzie or Miliband assumed, so much detail is missing that many of the implications are obscure. This appendix analyses the organisational development of the Edinburgh Labour Party, and explores some of the implications.

The major problem is a shortage of direct evidence: there is but a single surviving item produced by a divisional Labour Party or Ward Committee during these years - and that not very useful.<sup>2</sup> Any account must therefore be gleaned from data in other sources: much of this is useful, but some gaps must remain.

Divisional and Ward organisation. In chapter 10, we saw that pre-1918 Labour Party ward committees had been few in number, and fleeting in existence. Only two were strong enough to pay dues to the Edinburgh branch in 1917/18; only four in 1919/20.<sup>3</sup> At the time of amalgamation, confidence was expressed about the progress of Party organisation,<sup>4</sup> but the indications are that this was premature. Table A.1 summarises the surviving evidence on when Division Labour

1. The most important and valuable study is still McKibbin, Evolution of the Labour Party, despite its being substantially based in national data.
2. This is an account book, almost certainly of Edin. South DLP; but even here the most complete sections relate to 1929-1930.
3. Edin. LP ARs 1917/18, 8, 1919/20, 22.
4. Edin. LP AR 1919/20, 18-21.

Parties and ward committees were formed (or first known to have been in existence). Although some ward committees may not be recorded, this is more likely in the later years, after their care

Table A.1 The Growth of Labour Party institutions in Edinburgh

<u>Year</u>	<u>1917 - 1924</u>					
	<u>Central</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>Leith</u>
1917	George Sq.(F) St.Leonard's (E)				Gorgie(E)	
1918	Women's Section (F)				Dalry(F)	Burgh LP(E)
1919	St.Giles' (E)				Women's Section(E)	
1920	'Nucleus' of DLP(E)	DLP(F)			'Nucleus'of DLP(E)	
1921						DLP(F)*
1922			DLP(F?)			Ward Committees (F)
1923		DLP(E) Calton(F)		Canongate (F) Portobello (F)		
1924	DLP(E)	Committees in 4 wards (F)		DLP(F)		

Notes: F: institution recorded as having been formed in this year.  
 E: institution recorded as having been in existence in this year; this cannot be taken to imply that the institution was not also formed in the same year.  
 \*: We may assume that the formation of a DLP in Leith in 1921 was merely a constitutional nicety, consequent upon the amalgamation of Edin. T&LC and Leith UTC & LP.

Source: all labour and trade union records researched.

could be delegated to DLPs and the Political Officer. And it is, at least, clear that in several cases DLPs were not formed until four or



or more years after the new national constitution decreed their existence.

At the time of the 1918 General Election, trade union and ILP branches seem to have co-operated on an essentially ad hoc basis to fight it: they sent delegates to the selection conferences (held under the auspices of the Edinburgh branch of the Labour Party), and very likely their commitment to the resulting electoral effort depended upon their success in ensuring the selection of their favoured candidate. Election agents were appointed by the branch, though largely financed by the organisations nominating the successful candidates. Municipal election organisation was similar; but although it was elections which provided the catalyst for organisation, it is by no means clear that organisation thus created always outlived the elections. The West Division, for instance, was fought in December 1918; in early 1920 a DLP was only in the process of formation.<sup>5</sup> And while the Canongate Ward, where a Labour candidate had been victorious in 1913, was contested in 1919, 1920 and 1922,<sup>6</sup> the Trades and Labour Council was endeavouring to form a ward committee as late as 1923.<sup>7</sup>

Even when formed, however, local Labour Party organisation seems often to have been less than vibrant. We know little of Ward Committees, but we can say something of DLP membership. DLPs were required to pay an annual affiliation fee of 2d. per member to the Trades and Labour Council, with a minimum of 30s.<sup>8</sup> Until the year 1924-1925 no DLP did so; table A.2 shows progress over 1924-1928. Two points stand out. First, in neither the two divisions won by Labour during these years (Central and East), nor

5. Ibid.

6. In 1921 it was, of course, contested by the NUR No. 1 branch.

7. T&LC minutes, 28 August 1923; only five people attended its first meeting (ibid., 26 September 1923).

8. T&LC Constitution and Rules (1922), 5; this fee was then forwarded by the T&LC to Labour Party head office.

Table A.2      Affiliation fees of Divisional Labour Parties in  
Edinburgh, 1924 - 1928

<u>Year</u>	<u>DLP</u>	<u>Fee paid</u>	<u>Members represented</u>
1924-25	West	30s	180 or less
	North	30s	180 or less
1925-26	West	30s	180 or less
	North	30s	180 or less
1926-27	West	55s(a)(b)	330
	North	30s(a)	180 or less
	South	30s	180 or less
1927-28	West	53s(c)	318
	North	30s	180 or less
	South	30s	180 or less
1928-29	West	70s4d(c)	422
	North	30s	180 or less

Notes: (a) In 1926, DLPs were called upon to pay a double affiliation fee: North and West Divisions each paid an extra 30s; this is excluded here;  
 (b) 17s8d of this was not paid until the following year, but is included in the 1926-27 figure;  
 (c) West DLP's payment in 1927-28 is marked "part 1927"; but there is no indication of how much of the following year's payment is for the previous year. The 1928-29 figure, therefore, may well overstate that year's fee and membership whilst correspondingly understating that for 1927-28.

Sources: T&LC ARs, 1925 - 1929.

in Leith where Labour's challenge otherwise came closest to victory, was there a Divisional Party. We may account for this, in Central Edinburgh and Leith, largely by the strength of the ILP; in East Edinburgh, the DLP may well have been hindered by the distance between the three main areas of Labour strength (Cannongate, Portobello, and Musselburgh); we know, in any case, that it was only formed in early 1924.<sup>9</sup> Second, two of those DLPs which were strong enough to affiliate, had less than 180 members each throughout the period - both, of course, were in barren Labour territory. Only one built up

9. T&LC minutes, 19 February 1924: it had been formed two days earlier.



a membership greater than 180: here (West Edinburgh) was a division with a pocket of long-standing Labour strength (Dalry and Gorgie had been the first wards won by Labour, in 1909 and 1911 respectively), yet even here the DLP probably never had more than 400 members.<sup>10</sup>

In these circumstances, the role of the Trades and Labour Council, and of its DLPs, was chiefly the mobilisation and co-ordination of other bodies (especially the ILP, but also trade unions) in electoral work: the DLPs did not have, in themselves, adequate strength. We do not, unfortunately, have a full description of the organisation of electoral work during the early 'twenties, but after the 1925 municipal elections, a reassessment took place which reveals, at least, some of the perceived weaknesses of earlier practice. (Although set in train early in 1926, most of this reassessment seems to have taken place after the General Strike, which strengthened centralist conceptions of organisation.) A Political Committee of the Trades and Labour Council was to take charge as a 'Central Election Committee' (CEC): this was to organise and allocate speakers 'in the same manner as was being done by the Strike Com[mi]tt[ee] for the Miners meetings'; it would control all press advertising on the basis of information supplied by ward committees; rather than granting money to wards, it would itself incur expenses (up to a maximum of £20 per contested ward); no ward committee would be empowered to issue publicity material without prior approval from the CEC; a 'motor cycle corps' would ensure 'rapid distribution of messages and information from C.E.C.', and the latter would be in constant session each evening for the four weeks preceding polling day 'to ensure 100% efficiency'.<sup>11</sup>

In view of the occasion of this reassessment, we must treat with some caution its perceptions of earlier failings. We know from

10. In addition, of course, DLP members' primary loyalties were to other organisations, especially the ILP: 'The people of St. Leonard's ... have built up an organisation, an arm of the Labour Movement, and they are represented now by three Labour Councillors. No wonder St. Leonard's ILP grows by leaps and bounds' (Labour Standard, 25 December 1926).

11. T&LC Minutes, 10 September 1926; these proposals were watered-down somewhat after pressure from the DLPs and ward committees: *ibid.*, 22, 28 September 1926.

earlier evidence that, after the formation of the Trades and Labour Council at least, political control of Labour candidates was centralised: in 1925, for instance, wards had to get the Council's permission for such matters as whether to issue an extra handbill, or whether to include a statement of their candidate's 'bonafides' in their publicity.<sup>12</sup> The criticism is not of decentralised organisation, but rather of the failings of a centralised structure: during the General Strike lessons had been learnt about how these could be made to operate efficiently.

Finance. In chapter 10, we suggested that trade union finance was vital to the electoral strategy. This fact is clearly shown in the income and expenditure of the Trades and Labour Council, some statistics of which are gathered in table A.3. Financially, political bodies were of marginal importance to the Council's work. Their contribution to the routine income was insignificant: during the years with which we are concerned, it did not rise above 3 per cent of affiliation fee income. Even if we look at income raised for elections, the story is similar. Although the ILP and the Labour Party contributed significant proportions in 1919/20 and 1920/21, and individual donations<sup>grew</sup> in the following year, thereafter contributions from these categories declined both relatively and absolutely; trade unions' contributions, however, grew rapidly in both respects, and for the four years from 1923 constituted 90 per cent or more of election income. Of course, these figures must be treated with some caution: in particular, we might expect local Labour Party organisations to retain income for their own purposes, rather than contribute it to a central fund, whilst this would be the natural route for union contributions. Yet bodies which found difficulty even in meeting minimal - and obligatory - affiliation fees can hardly have been wealthy, and the scale of union electoral contributions from 1923 onward is beyond anything the political bodies had managed, even in the 'affluent' years just after the war.

Control. Union opinion was vital to the Labour Party not only for financial reasons. From 1920 onward, the union delegates at the Trades and Labour Council could, in theory, control the policy

12. Ibid., 6 October 1925.



Table A.3

## Political Income and Expenditure of Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council, 1919 - 1928

	1919-20(a)	1920-21(a)	1921-22	1922-23	1923-24	1924-25.	1925-26	1926-27	1927-28
Total T&LC income	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.	£.s.d.
from affiliation fees:	365:17:3	358:5:8	322:10:10	322:16:0	437:4:11	456:19:0	472:17:1	366:9:6	
T&LC affiliation fees from political bodies:	5:17:0	6:7:10	6:10:8	5:15:8	11:1:4	11:2:2	13:3:8	13:1:2	
(Political fees as per cent of total fee income:)	(1.59)	(1.79)	(2.03)	(1.74)	(2.53)	(2.43)	(2.78)	(3.56)	
<hr/>									
Edin. LP Special Election									
Fund: Total sum raised:	154:19:3	93:19:2	37:1:10	57:11:4	139:12:0	178:15:4	123:11:3	150:19:4	84:2:6
- of which: for:									
Municipal election fund:			31:9:10	57:11:4	86:4:0	95:12:0	123:11:3(d)	108:5:7	73:15:6
Parliamentary " "			(5:12:0)(c)		53:8:0	83:3:4	42:13:9(e)	10:7:0 (e)	
- of which: from:									
trade union bodies:	68:9:6	61:6:0	22:6:10	49:4:10	137:1:6	172:10:10	120:6:3	134:12:6	73:12:6
(per cent)	(44.2)	(65.2)	(60.2)	(85.5)	(98.2)	(96.5)	(97.4)	(89.2)	(87.5)
I.L.P. bodies:	55:8:9 (b)	2:17:0	3:10:0	6:4:0	2:0:0	5:2:6	3:5:0	5:18:0	4:5:0
(per cent)	(35.8)	(3.0)	(9.4)	(10.8)	(1.4)	(2.9)	(2.6)	(3.9)	(5.0)
Local Labour Party bodies:	25:0:0	23:7:2	3:6:6	1:10:0	-	-	-	6:11:0	1:0:0
(per cent)	(16.1)	(24.9)	(9.0)	(2.6)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(4.3)	(1.2)
Other sources: (f)	6:11:0	5:19:6	7:18:6	12:6	12:6	1:2:0	-	3:17:10	5:5:0
(per cent)	(4.2)	(6.4)	(21.4)	(1.1)	(0.4)	(0.6)	(-)	(2.6)	(6.2)
<hr/>									
Edin. LP Election									
Expenditure: total:	228:11:10	160:11:11	112:13:5	137:16:2	188:3:10	252:1:9	148:16:2	303:10:4	246:11:7
of which:									
- Town & Parish Council:	171:19:1	160:11:11	83:15:8	125:15:2	99:15:2	100:0:0	128:16:2	235:16:7	231:4:7
- Parliamentary:			4:11:0		53:8:8	83:3:4	42:13:9	10:7:0	
- Education Authority:	51:19:9		8:17:9			38:18:5			
- Donations to Local LPs for organisation, etc.:	4:13:0		20:0:0	7:10:0	30:0:0	30:0:0	20:0:0	25:0:0	5:0:0

Notes: (a) excluding Leith; (b) includes large number of collections by individuals, catalogued under 'ILP' and presumably members; (c) Education Authority election; (d) Municipal and Parish Council election; (e) Leith by-election fund; (f) chiefly donations by individuals. Source: T&LC ARs 1920-1928, and calculations thence.

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Table A.4 Participation of political delegates in Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council, 1920-27

	1915-16	1916-17	1917-18	1918-19	1919-20	1920-21	1921-22	1922-23	1923-24	1924-25	1925-26	1926-27
No.of meetings:	26	27	26	25	28	27	25	26	27	32	36	28
No.of union organ- isations affiliated: 83	79	84	80	84	82	95	70	79	82	86	92	93
No.of political organ- isations affiliated:						12	10	11	16	19	23	25
of which:- DLPs						5	5	5	6	7	7	7
- ILP						4	2	2	5	8	9	10
- Other						3	3	4	5	4	7	8
No.of delegates: (per cent of total)	201	209	213	217	282	308	229	245	276	278	278	281
- Trade union						(90.6)	(87.4)	(86.6)	(84.4)	(82.7)	(81.3)	(80.3)
- Political						32	33	38	51	58	64	69
of whom:- DLP						( 9.4)	(12.6)	(13.4)	(15.6)	(17.3)	(18.7)	(19.7)
- ILP						18	21	24	27	30	30	31
- Other						9	6	6	15	20	21	23
Mean attendance per meeting: (per cent of total)	71.5	66.8	80.7	71.4	66.6	(90.2)	(86.1)	(83.3)	(88.8)	(85.4)	(86.5)	(84.5)
- T.U. dels.						71.7	64.2	70.1	81.3	77.6	76.0	82.6
- Political dels:						( 9.8)	(13.9)	(16.7)	(11.2)	(14.6)	(13.5)	(15.5)
of whom:- DLP						5.3	5.4	9.3	5.5	5.6	8.3	7.9
- ILP						2.7	3.8	1.8	2.5	4.9	2.6	4.7
Mean no.of meetings attended by delegates(a):						6.5	7.8	7.9	8.2	7.7	7.6	8.2
- from T.U.s	9.9	8.9	10.5	9.1	6.5	6.8	8.7	10.2	5.6	6.4	5.2	6.1
- from political organisation						8.2	7.1	10.8	5.7	5.2	7.7	7.1
of whom:- from DLPs						8.2	17.8	8.4	4.6	6.8	3.4	5.7
from ILP												

Note: (a) adjusted for varying number of meetings in each year to permit comparison between years.

of Labour in Edinburgh. Table A.4 shows that, even at the end of our period, delegates from the Labour Party and other political organisations constituted less than one-fifth of the total number of Trades and Labour Council delegates; nor were they in a position to gain effective control through more assiduous attendance. Indeed, if anything their attendance rate at the Council's meetings was poorer than that of their trade union comrades. Save in the two years 1921-1923, the average political delegate attended fewer meetings. They did, it is true, achieve generally better representation on the Council's Executive Committee, and this was clearly important: nevertheless, they remained in a minority throughout (see table A.5). It is, however, important to bear in mind that many

Table A.5 <u>Organisational background of Trades and Labour Council</u>								
<u>Executive members, 1920 - 1928</u>								
<u>Delegates</u>	<u>1920-21</u>	<u>1921-22</u>	<u>1922-23</u>	<u>1923-24</u>	<u>1924-25</u>	<u>1925-26</u>	<u>1926-27</u>	<u>1927-28</u>
<u>from:</u>								
Trade								
Unions	12	11	11	10	11	11	15	14
(%)	(70.6)	(64.7)	(64.7)	(58.8)	(64.7)	(64.7)	(75.0)	(70.0)
Political								
bodies	5	5	6	7	6	6	5	6
(%)	(29.4)	(29.4)	(35.3)	(41.2)	(35.3)	(35.3)	(25.0)	(30.0)
<u>of whom:</u>								
- DLP	3	3	5	3	3	4	4	5
- ILP	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	0
- SDF	0	0	1	2	1	1	1	1
- Guild								
Socialist								
Society	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Unident-								
ifiable		1						
Total								
Membership								
of Exec.								
Committee:	17	17	17	17	17	17	20	20

Source: T&LC ARs, 1920 - 1927.

trade union delegates - especially, perhaps, those on the Executive Committee - had political affiliations, even though they were not delegates of political bodies. Save in 1920-21, for instance, we know that there was always at least one, sometimes two (and possibly more) SDF members on the Executive who were trade union delegates.<sup>13</sup>

13. Not always the same people from year to year: delegates' organisations changed.



Table A.6

The Labour Party's performance in parliamentary elections in Edinburgh, 1918-1929

Key: In each box the data is arranged thus:

Labour Vote	
Labour's % of poll	No. of other Candidates
E: if Labour candidate elected	

	December 1918	April 1920	November 1922	December 1923	October 1924	March 1927	May 1929
Central	7161 51.8 E 1	-	12876 57.9 E 1	13186 67.9 E 1	13628 60.5 E 1	-	16762 59.0 E 2
East	..	-	..	..	9330 44.3 E 2	-	13933 47.3 E 2
North	..	3808 17.1 2	..	..	8192 27.9 2	-	11340 32.2 2
South	..	..	..	..	..	-	5050 14.7 2
West	2642 14.7 2	-	..	6836 25.7 2	9603 33.1 2	-	15795 38.6 E 2
Leith	4251 19.1 2	-	6567 23.5 2	8267 35.5 1	11250 40.4 1	12350 42.0	15715 43.3 1
All constituencies: Total Labour vote:	14054		19443	28289	52003		78595
Constituencies with Labour candidate:							
Labour per cent of poll: ..	25.9		38.8	40.8	37.3		38.4
Edin. Central and Leith:							
Labour per cent of poll:	31.5		38.8	50.3	49.4		50.2

Notes: .. no Labour candidate  
- no contest

Source: calculated from F.W.S.Craig, British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949 (London 1969).

Elections. The Labour Party's performance in parliamentary elections is summarised in table A.6. Several points deserve attention. Not until October 1924 did Labour contest more than three of the city's six divisions; in 1922, it could manage only two. Contests seem to have occurred where Labour organisation was strong, rather than where the prospects of success were greatest. The two were not always identical. East division was won on the first occasion a Labour candidate entered the field, and just eight months after a DLP was formed; West division was consistently fought, though the prospects of success were poor. On three occasions (once in 1924, twice in 1929) Labour won because other parties were unable to come to an agreement; Leith, however, might well have been captured at the 1924 and 1929 general elections had the Conservatives not stood down in favour of the Liberals. Although, taking all constituencies which Labour contested, the main advance in votes seems to have been between 1918 and 1922, this statistic is misleading: when we look at those constituencies which were contested by Labour in every general election (just Edinburgh Central and Leith), it is clear that the main advance in electoral support came between the 1922 and 1923 elections.

Labour's municipal election performance is surveyed in table A.7. After the War, the record was initially poor. In 1919 there was, according to The Scotsman, a 'Heavy Defeat for Labour';<sup>14</sup> in 1920 'Labour received a severe setback'<sup>15</sup> when only two of its nineteen candidates were victorious. Whereas Labour had a significant presence on Leith Town Council before amalgamation,<sup>16</sup> not a single Labour Municipal or Parish Council nominee was returned for the Port' in 1920.<sup>17</sup> In 1921 the number of Labour nominees slumped to four, only one of whom was returned. Over the following years, as Labour organisation improved, the number of candidates increased rapidly: this seems, chiefly, to have allowed Labour to expand within favourable areas, for the mean vote obtained per opposed candidate also rose.

14. The Scotsman, 5 November 1919.

15. Ibid., 3 November 1920.

16. In 1919, three Labour candidates had been successful in the Leith Town Council Election (The Scotsman, 5 November 1919); the Wards were redrawn on amalgamation, however, and comparison is not easy.

17. The Scotsman, 3 November 1920.



Table A.7 Labour Votes in Municipal Elections in Edinburgh, 1919-27

Ward	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927
Calton	..	1249	1154	..	1776	1757	2357	2882	2533
Canongate	1509	1499	(R: 1042)	1290	1910	2075	2289	3734	3169
Newington	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	1134
Morningside	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Merchiston	..	..	..	..	364	..	..	..	..
Gorgie	1051	1492	2192*	2398*	3458*	..	2304	3095	3233
Haymarket	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	868
St. Bernard's	..	486	..	..	..	1006	..	1112	..
Broughton	..	..	..	..	..	..	1156	1407	1479
St. Stephen's	..	..	..	..	..	787	1139	..	..
St. Andrew's	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
St. Giles	850	..	(U: 877)	849	(U: 1072)	1854	2544	2839	2451
Dalry	1036	2061*	..	(b)	1953	1906	2631	3362	2902
		1349							2836
George Sq.	872	890	1255	1179	1392	..	1641	1878	2213
St. Leonard's	1117	1304	(C: 930)	866	..	3373*	3177*	3444*	3907
Portobello	..	..	..	..	..	1380	1544	2703	2373
S. Leith	(a)	1748	..	1260	..	..	1570	..	2426
		1330							
		1317							
N. Leith	(a)	1123	..	..	..	1953*	1731	2114	2580
		942							
		852							
W. Leith	(a)	798	..	..	..	..	755	1189	..
C. Leith	(a)	829	..	768	1417	900	1034	1596	1693
		753							
		706							
Liberton	(a)	608*	719	1126	..	693	..	1370	1064
Colinton	(a)	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Corstophine & Cramond	(a)	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
<u>Official Labour Candidates only:</u>									
Number:	6	19	4	9	7	11	14	14	16
Wards									
contested:	6	12	4	9	7	11	14	14	15
Total vote:	6435	21336	5320	9736	12270	17684	25872	32725	36861
Mean vote per opposed candidate:	1072.5	1122.9	1330.0	1217.0	1752.9	1607.6	1848.0	2337.5	2303.8
No. of Labour councillors after election	6	4	2	3	3	5	6	14	15

Notes: (i) excludes by-elections: refers only to election held on first Tuesday of November each year; (ii) where more than one vote appears, more than one seat was contested in the ward that year; (iii)

references: (a) Not within Edinburgh until 1920; (b) Labour candidate returned unopposed; (C) A Communist candidate stood in St. Leonard's in 1921, against a sitting former Labour councillor who stood as an independent after a dispute with the Labour Party; (R) Candidate of NUR No.1 branch's Political Committee: he stood as Labour candidate in the same ward in 1922; (U) 'Unemployed' candidates: T&LC AR 1928, 10, retrospectively includes the 1923 vote as 'Labour' perhaps because the candidate was, by then, T&LC President.

Sources: The Scotsman, 5 Nov. 1919, 3 Nov. 1920, 2 Nov. 1921, 8 Nov. 1922, 7 Nov. 1923, 5 Nov. 1924, 4 Nov. 1925, 3 Nov. 1926; T&LC AR 1928, 10; R.A. Fox 'Members of the Labour Party elected to Edin. Town Council', 1.

Finally, we should briefly look at candidates of other labour bodies. We may divide these into three categories: first, candidates of the SLP, who seem to have made a virtue of opposing Labour and Communist candidates (in the latter case often adopting the 'Communist' label); second, Communist Party candidates; and third, candidates of a variety of organisations, often standing with tacit Labour support. SLP votes are shown in table A.8; they

Table A.8      Socialist Labour Party votes in Edinburgh municipal elections, 1919 - 1927

<u>Year</u>	<u>Ward</u>	<u>SLP vote</u>	<u>Labour vote</u>
1919	Canongate	155	1509
	St. Leonard's	27	1117
	Dalry	29	1036
	Gorgie	44	1051
	George Square	27	872
1920	Calton	54	1249
	Canongate	52	1499
	Gorgie	33	1492
	Dalry	47	2061
	(2 seats)	41	1349
	St. Leonard's	36	1304
	Leith South	157	1748
	(3 seats)	123	1330
		93	1317
	Leith Central	41	829
1921	(3 seats)	32	753
		22	706
	Gorgie	34	2192
	Dalry	151	-
1923	Leith South	295	-
	Leith North	141	-
	St. Giles'	46	1072 (Unemployed)
	St. Leonard's	61	865 (Communist)
	Leith South	154	408 (Communist)

Source: The Scotsman, as in table A.7.

rarely rose above the derisory. Communist Party candidates generally fared somewhat better, as table A.9 shows, yet where there was no official Labour candidate, they do not seem to have won the support of



all Labour voters; whilst on the single occasion the Party fought against a Labour candidate, its vote slumped. Contests by other

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Table A.9                      Communist Party votes in Edinburgh municipal elections, 1919 - 1927

<u>Year</u>	<u>Ward</u>	<u>Communist vote</u>	<u>Labour vote</u>
1921	St. Leonard's	930	-
1923	St. Leonard's	865	(61:SLP)
	Leith South	408	(154:SLP)
1924	St. Leonard's	172	3373

Source: The Scotsman, as table A.7.

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organisations are shown in table A.10. On no occasion were these opposed by official Labour candidates. The St. Giles Unemployed candidature was de facto (and in 1922 de jure) recognised as a Labour contest in all but name; even by 1921 the ex-service vote was of declining importance; whilst the Railway Workers learnt their lesson in 1921, and their candidate stood for Labour in the following year.

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Table A.10                      Municipal election performance of miscellaneous labour bodies in Edinburgh, 1919 - 1927

<u>Year</u>	<u>Ward</u>	<u>Organisation</u>	<u>Vote obtained</u>
1921	Canongate	Railway Workers	1042
	Broughton	Ex-Service	503
	St. Giles	Unemployed	877
1922	St. Giles	Labour and Unemployed	849
1923	St. Giles	Unemployed	1072

Source: The Scotsman, as table A.7.

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## Appendix B

### The Railwaymen's Intervention in Electoral Politics, 1921

In 1921, as the economic basis for industrial militancy eroded, many socialists who had previously embraced an industrial road to political power began to seek other routes. Yet, in general, they did not turn entirely from their former methods; rather, they built on and adapted them. Here we discuss, briefly, the intervention into electoral politics made by the Edinburgh No. 1 branch of the NUR in 1921, and we reproduce some key documents.

We have seen that the No. 1 branch was strongly committed to the notion of the NUR as an industrial union; this general commitment was supportive of (and supported by) an important element of the branch's active membership, which espoused revolutionary syndicalism and Marxism in various forms. One example will illustrate the branch's mood. When, in mid-1920, the NUR's Head Office issued a circular to branches pointing out that an increase in pilfering was 'reflecting on the character of railwaymen', the branch resolved that the circular 'lie on the table' (i.e., that no action be taken): 'Petty thefts [*sic*] was the natural result of capitalism, and it should be no concern of the Unions'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even in 1920, questions were being raised about the branch's role: 'as the railwaymen were concerned in everything in industry ... Could we be always striking [*?*]', one member asked when Leith's dockers asked for support.<sup>2</sup> In June 1920

1. NUR No. 1 branch minutes, 4 July 1920; this resolution was carried by 25 votes to 24.
2. Ibid., 23 May 1920: the dispute had arisen over the question of involvement in the Russo-Polish war, and, in replying, another member thought it their duty to 'use the Trades Unions to save the Revolution!'



an EC member, responding to criticism, maintained that it had received a 'whole spate of requests ... for sympathetic action', and that the EC 'had decided it was not the function of one union to fight the struggles of every union'; the EC had suggested a reorganisation of the TUC 'along new lines to meet new conditions'.<sup>3</sup>

In response to this, an important debate on union strategy ensued:

Bro Stobbie moved 'That we think and instruct our E.C. that the only way to clear the pitch, is through the Industrial Union.' ... The Trade Union [he continued] was cracking up and was fast becoming obsolete. The N.U.R. cannot fight their own battles not to speak of other Unions' battles. Industrial Unionism does not mean fighting for wages, but it meant fighting for the railways. As the class struggle gets more acute you must organise to abolish the present system. ... Bro Niven [the EC member] said that if all were Stobbies it would be easy, but there is such a conglomeration of ideas and ideals that he doubted clarity was long and far. Our people is more interested in codifying and classifying present conditions, than in fighting for Stobbies theory. Bro Rollo ... referred to our progress, it seemed rather like retrogression. Bro Fraser disapproved of supporters of such motions attitude of getting 'forward' motions passed at branch meetings and when sent to E.C. to be acted on did not represent the membership and when accepted by Central body and endeavour made to put same in concrete form often failed, and explained to some extent the unstableness of our E.C. Bro Stobbie and members like him had not done their work - converted the rank and file [sic]. Bro Stobbie in reply said the conditions were ready if the workers were not ready. <sup>4</sup>

Despite its opponents' weighty criticisms, Stobbie's motion was agreed by 59 votes to nine. Yet the doubts were beginning to be expressed. The tide began to turn as the months passed: 'the

3. Ibid., 20 June 1920.

4. Ibid.

workers' became increasingly unready to take action, and a realisation seems to have dawned that this was not unconnected with 'the conditions'.

By mid-1921, therefore, Fraser, the branch member who had won so little support a year earlier, could win the branch's approval for 'setting up its own political Committee with a view of running its own Municipal and other Council candidates'. He held that 'the local conditions of Labour' - presumably, the fact that the branch, with its belief in industrial unionism and its syndicalist rejection of politics, had consistently refused to affiliate to the Trades Council<sup>5</sup> - meant that 'this branch being a large section of the working class was deprived ... of expression hence the need of action'.<sup>6</sup>

The Committee agreed a 'Platform' and 'Constitution' in August. According to the latter,

The Committee shall make the necessary arrangements for running elections to local bodies. It will publish election addresses on behalf of all candidates, such addresses to be submitted to the branch for adoption in order that the principle underlying the Committee be kept in tact [*sic*].

The Committee shall procure candidates, and will submit such names to the branch for approval. All candidates will then be subservient to the Committee, who in their turn shall be subservient to the branch.

All candidates must agree to above platform and to the Constitution. Should a candidate be elected, and thereafter not conform to the essentials of the constitution, the Committee shall summon the person before them (and if necessary bring the matter before the branch) and if guilty [*he*] will be asked

5. See, e.g., *ibid.* 18 December 1918, 14 March 1920.
6. *Ibid.*, 5 June 1921: the motion, technically to consider 'the advisability of setting up' such a committee, was passed by 18 votes to 3; a committee of eight was elected a fortnight later (*ibid.*, 19 June 1921).



to resign, all financial assistance being withdrawn.

As restriction obtains through the N.U.R. being affiliated to the Labour Party which prevents this Committee participating in Parliamentary elections their activities are therefor<sup>e</sup> confined to contesting local elections. 7

Leaving aside the clear political differences with Labour Party socialism implicit in the 'Platform', it is worth noting here the concentration on two related issues: the concern, almost the expectation, that elected representatives would be tempted from their true duty; and the determination that the branch should control them.

On this basis, the branch decided to contest the Canongate Ward at the November 1921 Town Council election.<sup>8</sup> Canongate contained a heavy concentration of railwaymen: hopes were high. Yet the path ahead was far from easy. When the Political Committee wrote to the Trades and Labour Council to announce its formation, and its intention to run candidates 'on industrial lines',<sup>9</sup> the Council invited two Committee representatives to meet its EC. According to the Council's minutes, the representatives said they had not received consideration from Trades Council or Labour Party, and asked the Council not to oppose the NUR candidate - but declared their intention of contesting it in any case.<sup>10</sup> 'The gist of Frasers report' of the meeting, however, (made to the Railwaymen's branch), 'was that what the Labour men wanted was our expression of opposition to their programme, which they got.'<sup>11</sup> What the branch got, of course, was considerable pressure from the Union's higher echelons: the Labour Party's Scottish Secretary wrote to the NUR about this 'breach of discipline'; J.H. Thomas wrote to the local full-time NUR official. But the branch resolved

7. Ibid., 14 August 1921: for the 'Platform', see above s.9.4, n.109.

8. Ibid.

9. T&LC minutes, 31 August 1921.

10. Ibid.

11. NUR No.1 branch minutes, 11 September 1921.

to 'go on with the fight';<sup>12</sup> its resolve was strengthened when the Union's EC 'decided that, neither they themselves nor the Labour Party had any power to interfere....'<sup>13</sup>

In due course, therefore, the campaign was started. The manifesto was drawn up (see below), and published despite opposition from branch members who held 'It was not in line with the rules; nor ... with revolutionary Socialism', and who attempted to 'amend the first portion so as to express an industrial form, and to wipe out the last part altogether.'<sup>14</sup> During the campaign, 24 meetings were held, all 'orderly' and all addressed by Railwaymen.<sup>15</sup> £53 9s was spent on the campaign; £87 11s 4d if the wages of candidate and agent were included. There was no canvass, but the candidate received 1042 votes 'which while we could have hoped to see candidate elected, was considered satisfactory.'<sup>16</sup>

In practice, however, the campaign was to be but a stage in the shift of the No 1 branch's politics from revolutionary syndicalism to a reformist labourism tinged by industrial unionism. A year later Fraser, the Railwaymen's candidate in 1921, was the officially-adopted Labour candidate for the ward;<sup>17</sup> by 1926 the whole episode was passed over in silence by the branch's historians.<sup>18</sup> The contest stands, nevertheless, as an important moment in a process of political reassessment. The manifesto<sup>19</sup> is a valuable insight into the outlook of men attempting to adapt their revolutionary

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 9 October 1921.

14. Ibid. : the attempt was defeated by 42 votes to 11.

15. Indeed, there was only one 'outside' speaker, Tom Drummond of Leith: *ibid.*, 20 November 1921.

16. Ibid. The Scotsman, 2 November 1921, commented thus on the campaign: 'The Canongate Ward is usually active on the day of a municipal election, and in past years considerable ingenuity and originality have been shown here in the designing of striking posters. This year the activity did not appear to be so great as formerly, and there was a distinct falling-off in the attractiveness of the hoardings and sandwich-boards.'

17. The Scotsman, 8 November 1922.

18. NUR No 1 branch, Jubilee Souvenir. 1876-1926.

19. The manifesto is pinned into NUR No 1 branch minutes, 9 Oct. 1921.



methods, formed in periods of industrial strength and optimism, to a time of industrial weakness - an insight into their shifting conceptions of politics.

### DOCUMENT

#### Canongate Ward Municipal Election 1921

Fellow-workers and Electors of the Canongate Ward:-

You are again being called upon to return to the Town Council a member to represent you. We, the Political Committee of No. 1 Branch, National Union of Railwaymen, have pleasure in nominating BRO. D.FRASER, as a Candidate. Mr FRASER is a member of our Branch, and has been unanimously adopted by them to contest the Canongate Ward. Our Branch of railwaymen has a membership of 2,300, and these are most resident in the Ward.

A unique feature in our nomination is that Mr FRASER is nominated by a body of Trade Unionists, and is therefore a representative of the rank-and-file, and not that of a pettifogging Ward Committee, or exclusive body of politicians. His candidature partakes more of an industrial representative than an orthodox Ward representative - forecasting a new basis of representation - the Industrial basis, or the representation of the useful occupations in Society in the Local Government of the rising Commonwealth of Labour.

Our Candidate stands for one Union in one Industry. For the mass action of the workers against the mass action of the masters. On the political field, raises the banner of one political party of the workers - believing as we do that it is only the Trade Union of Labour that can set up the true political party of Labour. This cannot be attained while the vast majority of our fellow-workers are

organised in crafts and trades. Division among ourselves defeats us every time in wage wars for advances, or against reductions in wages - the true vision of Labour being narrowed and stunted thereby. We take up this fight in the face of the discomfiture prevailing in our ranks to-day, conscious of the fact that our defeat is the result of the want of solidarity in our ranks, calling upon the working class to organise as they work in the shop, railway, etc., and together in one great International Union. As a consequence of this unity there shall arise such political clearness that a great Labour Party will be the result, which, in combination, will sweep out of existence private control of our means of livelihood, and the unsolveable problems facing us to-day, and set up in its place the Commonwealth of Labour - of economically free women and men.

The situation facing us to-day is unsolveable if we continue not to recognise that the solution lies in the political and industrial overthrow of the present system of wealth production carried on for the benefit of a few men and women, whose sole justification is their legal right to own the means whereby Society gets its living. Our challenge is that Capitalist ownership has failed to organise Industry so as to provide security of life for the people - which is the basis of civilised life - as witness the poverty, insecurity, and unemployment prevailing now, and that in the face of stupendous means of production; and that they should surrender that power of organisation into the hands of the organised working class, who alone are capable of organising Industry to provide wealth upon which to base the civilised life of to-day.

The burden of blame for our deplorable conditions to-day is put upon the working men, who must carry the misery also, till the evil is undone by the wise "reconstructors." Needless to say the blame must be placed where it belongs, not on the workers but on the Capitalist system. We believe there is no reconstruction possible for the workers. Despite the desperate efforts of the Government and the masters, only one result is shown, viz. :- the lowering of the standard of life, and multitudes of unemployed.



It would seem the test of "reconstructions" is to be how far the workers will tolerate the pressure. In the face of these truths only Socialism is the alternative. This cannot be secured if you, our fellow workers, persist in putting into the hands of the Capitalists the law-making and administrative power of the Nation. To continue to turn a deaf ear to this appeal is foolish.

You may ask what has this to do with a Municipal Election? And we would reply by pointing you to the demands of the unemployed on the Council; and the fact, in face of these demands, Local Authorities have strained the Constitution, and even broken the law. More and more marked has become the influence of Administration on Government in these days, which shows the political nature of Administration itself. Therefore, as it is necessary to take advantage of every weapon in a struggle, the workers would be foolish not to recognise the value of this one.

We recognise that in a Municipal Election Campaign the elector's mind will be turned to "housing", "relief of rates", "unemployment", etc., etc., which are "burning questions", and also intensely political too. As shown above, with the return of our Candidate to the Council we cannot hold out that those ills will vanish. On the other hand we would point out these conditions are bound up with the present Capitalist system, and will only be remedied by its abolition. But our Candidate, if elected, would use whatever power he may possess in the Council to the advantage of the workers in their struggle to live; and would support such measures as would tend to brighten the existence of the army of toilers during the period which must elapse between now and the workers' emancipation.

#### W O M E N   V O T E R S .

The appeal, "fellow-workers", applies to women voters just as it does to the men. Domestic labour is equally as necessary as any other labour, hence it is just as important as any other labour.

But it has never been paid for! Motherhood, child-rearing, and the making of new generations have never been recognised. Economists say that this wonderful and noble function is paid for and included in the weekly wages of the labourers. Women, vote down this age long degradation!

Fellow-workers, you will see from the foregoing, with the Council in your hands something could be done to prepare the way for your final victory over the Capitalist class.

By voting for our Candidate you will be voting in the interest of yourselves and of the working class.

Yours faithfully,

Edinburgh, No. 1 Branch N.U.R.,  
Political Committee,

JAS.STOBIE, Chairman  
D.FRASER, Secretary.



Appendix C

A Letter on the Time Demanded of Labour Public Representatives

At various points in our story, it has been implied that membership of the various public bodies might have a significant effect on the activity and outlook of labour public representatives. The letter below has a bearing on this question. It was written by a Labour member of the Edinburgh Education Authority to the Secretary of the Trades and Labour Council. Thomas Paris had been a member of the Education Authority since 1924, and was a partner in a small firm of jobbing printers.

DOCUMENT

33 COMELY BANK STREET  
EDINBURGH

14.5.27

Dear Comrade Crawford

Some time ago, Smithies asked me to give a record of the time required by a Representative on the Authority. I have just recently looked into this and overleaf give such a record as affects myself. It is fairly representative of what is required to discharge the duties conscientiously. Of course, I can run out and in close up to the meeting hours, and so save considerable time in the aggregate. But a representative in employment would require to "get off" forenoon or afternoon just as I have noted. These could be reduced by the employee-representative refusing to accept Special and Sub-Committee appointments.

May I take this opportunity of writing to suggest preliminary steps be taken against the next Election of Education Authority, which takes place in March 1928. The Political Officer might have

a special committee appointed to discuss programme and modus operandi. This in itself would require time to evolve schemes, for we must earmark October and early November for the Municipal elections.

Yours faithfully,

Thos Paris

Record of Time

Health Committee - Afternoon monthly

Property & Works Do.       "       "

Continuation Class Do.   "       "

Fields & Sports - Afternoon off six times and occasional evening mtgs.

One Sat.       forenoon annually.

Visitation of Schools (5) - Forenoon each, quarterly.

Sub. & Special Committees - As appointed. I have had a good number of these.

Special Schools, Hospitals and Homes - Say a dozen per annum. Involves forenoon - often extending to whole day. Such places as Humble, Ceres, Dunblane, Dundee, Glasgow, Kirkintilloch, and Larbert having to be visited.

Meetings of Parents - 3 afternoons per ann.

Meetings of Work People (propaganda for Continuation Classes) as required.

School Closings & Sports - presenting prizes every day fully for 10 days in July (before Summer vacation).

Regular Monthly Meeting of Authority and my Special Meetings - at least three per year - Half-day each.



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